



**PHD**

**Parental choice of preschool in Taiwan**

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# **Parental Choice of Preschool in Taiwan**

Submitted by Chia-Yin Hsieh

For the degree of PhD  
of the University of Bath  
2008

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## **Abstract**

This research investigates parental choice in an active preschool education market in Taiwan. Most research into parental choice of school has been conducted in quasi-markets; markets that are highly regulated by government policy. The Taiwanese preschool market could be said to be a true market, operating through supply and demand and regulated by price. How parents operate in such markets and how their choice influences what is offered, is less explored.

The research consisted of following eighteen parents through the choice process. Data collection methods involved diaries completed before the child started preschool and two in-depth interviews; one at the beginning of the school year and one nine months later. The parents who supplied the information came from different educational backgrounds, social status and family structures. For most it was their first experience of choosing an educational setting for their children.

Using a rational choice theoretical framework the thesis argues that there was certain rationality in the parents' process of choice but balancing the benefits and costs of preschool education was embedded in a wider family context. In addition, the findings show that whilst the parents were initially concerned about the more structural aspects of quality, their on-going engagement with the preschool provision enabled them to have a deeper understanding of process issues. However, there were other criteria that the parents used which would suggest that they were defining quality in a way that may be more influenced by Taiwanese life and culture. One implication is that the quality of preschool provision is not likely to improve if it is purely dependent on preschools wishing to meet the parents' expectations. However,

neither will it improve if the contextual conditions are ignored. The implications for Taiwanese government preschool policy are discussed.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1 The rationale for this research**

Early childhood experts agree that children start learning from the moment they are born and do so by observing, imitating, investigating and exploring (David, 1999; Podmore, 2004). They are active learners and need to be given the opportunity to explore their world (Abbott, 1994; David, 1999; DES1990; Hutchin, 1999). Western research (David, 1999) points out that the first eight years of life cover an important period of change and development in children's thinking and in their abilities to make sense of the world; therefore, children deserve the very best start. In Chinese culture, children's high academic achievement, appropriate social manners and interactions are considered to contribute to their future success (Hsieh, 2004). Taiwanese parents, therefore, believe that if their children are to achieve academically and behave well, they need to start early (Hsieh, 2004; Jose et al., 2000). Both the values of Chinese culture and the findings of Western research support the view that children deserve the best start to help their future development. This view may have led to the current popularity of preschool education in Taiwan. Most parents send their children to preschool before they have reached the compulsory school age of six years old although preschool education is not compulsory. Ninety seven percent of five-year-old children and ninety percent of four-year-olds attend preschool education in Taiwan (Lin, 2002).

As a preschool educator, I also believe that if children have a high quality preschool education it will help them to successfully progress through later life. They need to be provided with a high quality learning environment which is positive, motivating, safe

and varied, in order to help them develop their basic skills, knowledge and understanding of the world. However, as preschool education is not compulsory, how to guarantee quality provision for all children is complex. Three quarters of preschools in Taiwan are private (Hung, 2002) and operate in a market based on supply and demand, and regulated by price. The Taiwanese Government seems unable to control the quality of these preschools; therefore, preschool provision is diverse and its quality varied. As parents have the freedom to choose any preschool for their children, school providers are inevitably concerned with parental expectations of preschool education and the need to meet their requirements. Every private preschool, thus, needs to have a unique selling point in order to meet the parents' preferences.

Parental choice can have a significant influence on the quality of preschool provision in Taiwan. If parents are aware of child development they may choose high quality preschools which meet children's needs. If they do not have such knowledge, what they choose for their children is less predictable. Consequently, if we want to improve the quality of preschool provision in Taiwan, understanding how parents operate in the Taiwanese preschool market and how their choice influences what is offered are important. The rationale for this study is that if we can better understand the criteria parents use when choosing a preschool, we may become aware of the influences on preschool provision in Taiwan; if preschool practitioners understand parental perspectives of preschool education better, they can work with parents in order to meet the parents' expectations as well as benefiting their children's needs.

This research examines the process of parental choice of preschools. It aims to probe and understand their expectations of preschool education, their initial criteria for

choosing a preschool, the influences on their choices and how these operate within the diversity of the preschool market in Taiwan. It will also explore how their criteria and expectations change with their on-going engagement with preschool provision. The research questions are:

- What are the parents' expectations of preschool education?
- What are their criteria for choosing a preschool?
- What are the influences on the choice process?
- To what extent, are they satisfied with their choice and have their expectations been met?

The process of choosing a preschool is complex. I expect this research to provide deep and useful information for preschool stakeholders, including preschool providers, policy makers, practitioners and parents, all of whom have a stake in improving the quality of preschool provision in Taiwan.

## **1.2 The Taiwanese context**

### **1.2.1 The effects of population density**

Taiwan is a small island located to the south-east of Mainland China (see Appendix 1). The island is about three hundred and ninety-four kilometres long with a greatest width of one hundred forty-four kilometres. The area is thus about thirty-six thousand square kilometres and supports a population of around twenty-three million. However, two thirds of the land is mountains, foothills and terrace tablelands, and not appropriate for cultivation. The high mountains run down the middle of Taiwan and

most of the population lives in the western part of the island. People migrate to urban areas where there are high density populations living in high-rise flats and cramped spaces.

However, it is convenient to live in an urban area. There are many convenience stores, supermarkets, department stores, restaurants, surgeries and schools in towns and cities. In urban areas, there may be several private surgeries, or cram schools<sup>1</sup> in the same building; different convenient stores are on the same street or several preschools<sup>2</sup> are in the same area. Therefore, people have a large variety of choice for their clothes, food, daily commodities, medical treatments and even education. They can compare the different products and choose according to their priorities, whether those be value for money or quality.

In addition, Taiwanese customers have high expectations of service. Their satisfaction depends upon the service delivery process and the treatment of the individual (Trappey and Lai, 1996). Personal interaction has a strong influence in business transactions. For medical treatment, customers or patients not only expect high quality treatment but also a friendly doctor and nurse. Moreover, suppliers in the market need to have a unique selling point and marketing strategy in order to both entice and satisfy their customers. A convenience store may need a special service or promotion to compete with other stores. A restaurant may have special menus or a certain kind of environment to attract customers. A preschool may need to have a specific approach, such as bilingual, Montessori, Froebel, a whole English language approach,

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<sup>1</sup> Cram schools provide educational service for children and adults which include vocational and academic education.

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, I use “preschool” to include a kindergarten and nursery which accepts children from age two to five.

or provide extra services, for example school buses, breakfasts or child care in the evening or on weekends to meet parents' needs. Taiwan's preschool provision operates in the same active and competitive market as other commercial services.

### **1.2.2 Economic change and the demand for preschools**

In 1949, after the civil war, the government of the Republic of China withdrew from Mainland China to Taiwan. Politics created two different 'countries' but these two 'countries' continue to share similar cultural values and beliefs. Except for a few aborigines, most people were ethnic Chinese, even before 1949. Taiwanese people still retain Chinese culture and Confucianism is the most influential code of values in Taiwanese beliefs and behaviour. After the government retreated to Taiwan, it opened its markets to the Western world and encouraged Western entrepreneurs to invest in Taiwanese industries. This has influenced the economic structure of Taiwan and shifted it from a mainly agriculture based economy to an industrial one. This has also affected areas of social life such family structure, which has changed from a reliance on the extended family to a greater focus on the nuclear family unit.

As a consequence of the economic change, the Taiwanese economy has grown rapidly since 1949 with an increasing need for labour (Hung, 2002). To meet this need, the percentage of females seeking employment has increased. Again family structures have been affected. The traditional mother's roles of educating and caring for young children have been undertaken by preschool teachers or caregivers (Hung, 2002). Preschools have fulfilled an increasing consumer demand. Chen (2003) and Chiou (1999b) provide the following statistics to demonstrate the increase in preschool provision in Taiwan over the last fifty years (Table 1.1). There has been an almost 32

fold increase since 1950. However, the demand for preschool provision is greater than the legal supplies. To fulfil the shortfall supply, more than six thousands unregistered private preschools have emerged (Chiou, 1999b; Lin, 2002) offering different approaches to preschool education.

Table 1.1: The number of preschools

	Kindergarten			Nursery		
	Total	Public	Private	Total	Public	Private
1950	203	177	26	12	--	--
2002	3275	1331	1944	3780	296	3484

### 1.2.3 The problems of preschool provision

Because the number of unregistered private preschools is large, many early childhood experts and professionals are concerned about the quality of the provision (Lin, 2002; Wei, 2002; Wang, 2002; Yang et al 2002). Yang's survey<sup>3</sup> (2002) identified a range of problems: for example few public preschools, a large number of children in preschool classes, unqualified teachers, minimum levels of salary, inappropriate curricula and non-registered preschools. Lin (2002) raised similar issues in her research. She pointed out that there were limited educational funds for preschool education, unclear standards, high child-teacher ratios, unqualified staff plus a high turnover of staff, and inappropriate curricula which all damaged the quality of preschool education in Taiwan. In addition, Taiwanese early childhood professionals (Chiou, 1999b; Lin, 2002; Wu, 2004) have expressed concerns about the existing preschool regulations. Legally registered preschool programmes include those for

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<sup>3</sup> This research was funded by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan.



kindergartens and nurseries but the regulations for cram schools<sup>4</sup>, are not designed for caring and educating young children. The Taiwanese Government does not make this clear. Because the regulations for registering a provision for children under the compulsory school age use a different system, there is the danger that a potential preschool provider will try to register their institution using the easiest option<sup>5</sup>. This may not give consideration to the best standards of provision.

### Preschool regulations

#### ***- registration: kindergarten versus nursery***

Taiwanese preschool provision is mainly composed of kindergartens and nurseries. They are regulated by different authorities. Kindergartens are regulated by the local education authorities and serve children aged four and five. They focus on education. Nurseries are registered by the social welfare authority and the provision is care. Nurseries serve children from the ages of one month to six years. Many kindergartens also emphasize care with education and accept three year old children or even younger into their schools. Additionally, nurseries focus not only on caring but also on educating young children. The functions of these two programmes are similar and the ages of the children overlap.

Despite similarities, the preschool provisions are regulated by different government authorities and follow different standards of ordinance (Ministry of Interior, 2004).

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<sup>4</sup> This is a special educational system in Taiwan. They provides after schooling classes to support the formal education of children and also provide vocational skills training for adults. The courses can be designed as daily or weekly classes.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the registration regulations for cram schools are more flexible than those for kindergartens or nurseries.

Staff working in kindergartens are called ‘teachers’; staff working in nurseries are called ‘nurses’ or ‘caregivers’. They have different standards of training and different levels of qualifications. Kindergarten teachers are required to have a bachelor’s degree but teachers working in nurseries only require a two year college certificate. Although kindergartens and nurseries are regulated by different administrators, the teaching practices are similar (Hsieh, 2004). But, the requirements for child-teacher ratios are different for the two systems. In a nursery, the child-teacher ratio can be 20:1 for children who are aged four and five, whereas the ratio is 15:1 in a kindergarten. Spatial requirements are also different for these two programmes. For a kindergarten, the average outdoor space for a child is at least two square meters. For a nursery, the outdoor space can be totally replaced by indoor place. As a result, the same aged children will probably experience a different kind of service. In addition, because the age range for nursery provision (two to five) is wider than for kindergarten (four and five), there is a great opportunity to enrol more students. It makes better business sense. The requirements for registering a kindergarten are higher than a nursery. Preschool providers, therefore, prefer to register as a nursery rather than a kindergarten (Chiou, 1999b; Lin, 2002).

To try and improve the quality of preschools, the government introduced a national evaluation system. The evaluation included different areas such as administration, curricula, teaching facilities and environmental safety. Evaluators were early childhood specialists in both the academic and practical fields. The results of these evaluations are published on the websites of educational or social welfare authorities. However, the evaluation of kindergartens and nurseries are undertaken by different authorities and the standards are not comparable (Hsieh, 2002). Although the results are easy for parents to access, whether they use them in choosing preschools is a

question to be addressed in the study.

***- registration: cram schools***

Cram schools are those schools which provide a wide range of courses to all learners, young and old, to strengthen their academic and vocational knowledge, abilities and skills. The roles, aims and curricula content of cram schools are different from preschool education. Not restricted by preschool regulations or laws, cram schools can have a variety of standards in terms of facilities, safety issues, curricula and teachers' qualifications. Some preschool providers register their schools as cram schools because of the low registration standards compared to a kindergarten or a nursery. However these cram schools deliver preschool education with limited regulation. The fact that cram schools are playing an increasing role in preschool provision is a major issue in Taiwan (Wu, 2004). The quality of care and education for young children is of concern to early childhood professionals and experts (Lin, 2002; Tsai, 2002; Wang, 2002; Wu, 2004). In 2004, the Taiwanese government considered amending the regulations to prevent cram schools from accepting young children for preschool education (Wu, 2004) because the standards were so variable but the legislation is still under negotiation.

***- English language teaching in the preschool curriculum***

Preschool curriculum regulations also state that English cannot be taught as a subject in preschools. In reality, most preschools provide English lessons as part of their curriculum (Wei, 2002). Taiwanese parents want their children to be well prepared to participate in the global competitive environment. Learning English is seen as an

important part of that preparation and has been very popular with preschool aged children for more than ten years (Lin, 2002; Lu and Chen, 2005). Parents strive and aspire for their children to become the best performers educationally. Part of these objectives is met by attending English language lessons from an early age. In response to this parental aspiration, there has been an increase in the private provision of preschools that teach English. Ninety seven percent of private preschools have introduced English into their curriculum, and sixty three percent of parents now consider sending their children to such preschools (Lu and Chen, 2005).

The debate concerning educationalists in Taiwan is whether English should be taught at such a young age, given that educational theory emphasizes that at the preschool age the focus should be on teaching children rather than subjects (Hutchin, 1999; Nutbrown, 1999; Siraj-Blatchford, 1998; Wood and Attfield, 1996). In response to the fact that it is against regulations to teach English but that it does happen in reality (Sun and Wang, 2004), a representative from the Taiwanese Ministry of Education suggested integrating English into teaching activities in an informal way so that providers were not breaking regulations. However, Wu (2004) points out the suggestion made by the Minister lacked clarity. Preschool providers and stakeholders therefore remain unclear as to whether English can be taught as a separate subject in the preschool, or whether it can only be taught in an informal way. Clearly, how they teach it has implications for the quality of the preschool curriculum that the children experience.

## Key problems

### *- teacher quality*

A strong influence on the quality of preschools in Taiwan is teachers' qualifications and stability (Lin, 2002; Wei, 2002). In private kindergartens Yang et al (2002) found that over half of the staff were unqualified and under a quarter held undergraduate degrees. Yang and his research team were surprised as the number of qualified teachers that educational institutions have trained should be enough to supply the needs of preschools. They found that low salary was one of the reasons for a high turnover of preschool teachers. Phillipsen et al. (1997) also pointed out that salaries were strongly associated with high turnover. In fact, salaries have been shown to be one of the strongest predictors of quality in preschools, showing a stronger connection than teacher-child ratios, teacher education or working environment (Phillipsen et al., 1997).

In the private preschool sector, teachers' salaries are very low and this affects the turnover, especially if they are qualified. Yang et al. (2002) found that only five percent of private kindergartens were offering the same level of salary as public kindergartens. Additionally, a quarter of the private schools in the survey did not have a teacher retirement pension system. The average salary of a qualified teacher in private kindergartens was 22507.7 Taiwanese dollars (about 375 British pounds) per month compared to teachers working in public kindergartens where the salary was 32507 Taiwanese dollars (about 541 British pounds). In addition, six percent of teachers in private schools earned salaries which were lower than the minimum pay condition

dictated by the Labour Standards Law<sup>6</sup>. This combined with an expectation of long working hours, means that many qualified teachers choose to leave their careers in preschool education and find other jobs (Lin, 2002; Wei, 2002).

High turnover rates influence the quality and continuity of preschool provision (Chien, 2004; Lin, 2002; Tsai, 2002; Wei, 2002). Phillipsen et al. (1997) suggested that schools should offer higher salaries in order to retain more qualified teachers. However, there is no legislative requirement for private preschool providers to offer reasonable salaries to teachers or caregivers. It depends on the providers' concept of a fair salary. Thus, there are different levels of salaries between different preschools and this causes staff instability (Lu, 2002). Lin (2002) and Lu (2002) suggest that in order to retain qualified preschool teachers the government has to reappraise the financial structure of schools and institute a reasonable system of teachers' wages which will be applicable to all preschool providers. They also point out that the preschool teaching profession needs to be given status and this will be promoted by a fairer salary scheme. Although research demonstrated the correlation between teachers' salary and retention which may in turn affect the quality of preschool education, low salary coupled with increasing teaching pressures are still major concerns in Taiwanese preschool provision (Lin, 2002; Lu, 2002). Whether teachers' qualifications and turnover rates were parents' concerns when they chose preschools will be probed in this study.

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Labor Standards Law in Taiwan, the minimum payment is NT 17400 dollars (about 290 pounds) per month.

## **- curriculum**

The preschool curriculum is also of concern to early childhood professionals in Taiwan. According to the regulations for preschool education in Taiwan, the main aims of early childhood education are to help children to preserve normal and healthy development, to acquire good living habits, to have a full life experience, to improve ethical and moral concepts and to develop gregarious habitual behaviours (Ministry of Education, 1981). Affective education, life education and moral education are the main areas of preschool education and all aim to foster children to become healthy and well developed people. However, one of the most widely identified characteristics of Chinese parents is the emphasis that they place upon their children's acquisition of academic skills (Jose et al., 2000). Parents prefer formal teaching pedagogy (teaching through subjects<sup>7</sup>) in preschool education. The preferred subjects include English, Chinese, Mathematics, music and crafts and lessons which focus on reading, writing and calculating and academic skills (Lin, 2002; Tsai, 2002; Wei, 2002). Nutbrown (2006) argues that if the preschool curriculum is artificially divided into subjects, teaching can be inappropriate and counter to the way in which children think and learn. Taiwanese early childhood educators (Lu, 2002; Tsai, 2002; Wei, 2002) worry that the formal pedagogy in Taiwanese preschools usually focuses on learning outcomes and the learning process; children's personal and emotional development and learning attitudes are ignored. Huang (2001) raised her concerns about the preschool curriculum in Taiwan when she mentioned that:

*contemporary education in Taiwan focuses on talents and subjects learning and is only concerned about the learning outcomes; those "instant education" approaches replace the regular curriculum. Many children are in educational*

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<sup>7</sup> The time table in many preschools is based on subjects. Each subject has a textbook and a student worksheet.

*traps: they seem to learn many skills and knowledge but those are superficial. As the result, children feel empty in their heart and lose the special character of a whole person. (Huang, 2001:40)*

In addition, the teaching materials that teachers use are also subject based and are not designed to support the learning process for different abilities and needs. Yang et al's (2002) survey found that not only private, but also public kindergarten teachers rely on teaching materials which are produced by early childhood publishers<sup>8</sup>. The teaching materials include teachers' handbooks for the whole curriculum with activities, teaching aids and children's textbooks. As a result, teachers do not need to plan curricula or design teaching activities for their students; they can use these ready-made teaching materials to teach young children. Lu (2002) argues that these teaching materials are artificially divided into different subjects and focus more on cognitive teaching and learning than developing children's creative and social development. They are commercial handbooks and have fixed plans so teachers may find it difficult to cater for children's different needs during lessons. The materials do not provide children with opportunities to choose from a variety of topics that they would prefer to play with or learn from. Research findings (Cryer, 1999; Drake, 2001; Hutchin, 1999) suggest that a high quality curriculum should offer a wide range and balance of subject matter and needs to be carefully planned to match children's abilities and preferences. Therefore, the curriculum that most preschools in Taiwan provide may not be appropriate for supporting children's learning and development.

Having discussed the concerns of Taiwanese early childhood professionals and some of the emerging research findings, I want to probe whether the issues that have been

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<sup>8</sup> There are many early childhood publishers which are private companies. They design the curriculum outline, teaching activities, teaching aids, text books and sell these to kindergartens.



highlighted, are considered by parents when they are in the process of selecting a preschool for their children. Whether they consider the teachers' qualifications and the staff turnover rate when they select a preschool? Do they believe children learn through play or subject teaching? Parental perspectives of preschool education may influence their choices of preschools. At the same time, if the private sector is to survive in the preschool market, their providers will need to meet parental preferences and parental choice can therefore affect the supply of preschool education. Specifically, parental expectations of preschool education, and their criteria for choosing a preschool may have a strong influence on the quality of preschool provision in Taiwan. On the other hand, it may also be possible that parents are being influenced on what to expect by what preschools offer. They may look for a preschool which is supplied by the preschool market

In addition, the preschool regulations in Taiwan have some certain effects on the preschool provision. For example in Taiwan, kindergartens, nurseries and cram schools provide preschool education for young children but the standards required of those three types of schools are different and, as a consequence, the quality of their curricula, adult qualifications and facilities may also differ. Many preschools, by focusing on English teaching, disregard what is known about children's development (Lin, 2002; Wei, 2002; Wu, 2004). The question is when parents select a preschool for their children; do they understand preschool regulations? Are they aware of preschool registration regulations? Does their understanding of preschool regulations and laws influence their choice of preschool for their children? Early childhood professionals have appealed to the Government of Taiwan to respond to young children's needs and their rights to care and education (Huang, 2001; Lin, 2002; Tsai, 2002; Yang et al., 2002). They urged the Government to examine preschool

regulations and laws in order to improve the quality of all preschools in Taiwan.

#### **1.2.4 Early childhood initiatives in Taiwan**

There have been three recent policies related to early childhood that have been initiated by the Government of Taiwan in response to the early childhood professional's concerns (Chien, 2004; Lu and Shih, 2000; Tsai, 2002; Song, 2001). These are: the early childhood educational voucher scheme, the expansion of early childhood provision so that it includes care and education by combining kindergartens and nurseries and extending school provision so that children can start school at five years instead of the age of six. At the time of writing, only the education voucher policy has been put into practice.

##### Expansion of early childhood provision

As mentioned earlier, legal preschools in Taiwan operate within two systems: kindergartens and nurseries, but provide similar care and education services for young children from the ages of two to five. However, they are regulated by two different authorities: the Ministry of Education and the Social Welfare Authority, with different standards for registration. One of the tensions that exist in Taiwan is that on the one hand, all Taiwanese children should have the right to have a quality preschool education that is regulated by clear standards. On the other hand, this is difficult to achieve if the provision that children receive is regulated by different authorities with different standards. This tension has been debated for more than ten years. It was therefore encouraging to see that in 1999 the Government of Taiwan announced a draft plan to expand preschool provision by combining kindergartens and nurseries.

However, preschool providers, preschool teachers and early childhood professionals have responded to the initiative with some anxiety (Chien, 2004; Wang, 2002).

The Government of Taiwan has not yet provided a clear rationale of why it is necessary to combine kindergartens and nurseries in order to have the same standards of regulations applying to all preschools. Preschool providers were concerned that the requirements to register as a preschool may be changed and might, therefore, be difficult to fulfil. In not being able to fulfil the requirement to obtain a license, they would not be able to compete in the preschool market. Early childhood professionals were concerned that if nurseries and kindergartens were to be combined there would be problems in administering similar standards; given that the responsibility would still remain with two different authorities. Practitioners' concerns revolved around their employment rights and level of qualifications. For example, kindergarten teachers were concerned that they would not be qualified in the "caring" element of the early childhood provision. On the other hand, nursery staff were concerned about their employment prospects because they generally do not hold Bachelor's degrees or degrees in education. Neither set of practitioners has been given any clear idea about what kind of certification they would need in order to work in the combined education and care provision. Because of those anxieties, the debate about combining kindergartens and nurseries continues and no final decision has been made<sup>9</sup>.

#### Extending compulsory education

The other initiative discussed in Taiwan for many years is the extension of compulsory education so that children start school one year earlier. In 2001, the

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<sup>9</sup> Originally, the government wanted to apply this policy to the whole country in 2005.

Ministry of Education held a meeting for “*The self-criticism and improvement of educational reform*”. It was at this meeting that policy makers presented their plan to extend compulsory schooling by adding one year of preschool education. The purpose of this decision was to expand early childhood education in the interest of long-term benefits and social justice<sup>10</sup> for Taiwanese children (Tsai, 2002). Children can have equal access to preschool education for one year. The idea of extending compulsory education is very good, but it requires a great deal of government funding.

The increasing demand for preschool education cannot be met by public sector funding. As Tsai (2002) says, with limited educational budgets the Government of Taiwan cannot set up public kindergartens for all. Parents may still need to choose preschool provision from the private sector. The problem will be for parents who may not be able to afford to send their children to private preschools. Therefore, Tsai (2002) believes that the only solution is to increase the amount of money the Government provides for early childhood education through an educational voucher scheme. In doing this, all parents would be able to send their children to preschools whether they were in the private or public sector.

Whilst Tsai’s suggestion may reduce the financial burden on parents who have to pay for preschool education; it does not mean that the quality of preschool education will be improved. If parents are choosing preschools for other qualities then all the vouchers will do is pay for their choice rather than improve the overall quality of the provision. In addition, more than ninety seven percent of five-year-old children already attend preschools (Lin, 2002). If the policy only funds the choice parents have without addressing the quality issues, then the appropriateness of the policy initiative

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<sup>10</sup> Children from disadvantaged families have equal opportunities for preschool education.

must be questioned.

Tsai's (2003) research revealed that if the one year extension policy is to be successful in improving the quality of preschool education, then certain issues need to be resolved. For example, the policy of combining kindergartens and nurseries to provide children with education and care has to be established in advance; an appropriate system of teachers' pay and condition should be instituted; and sufficient subsidies for preschool education should be provided. Hsu (2002) has also suggested that the Government of Taiwan should accelerate the mechanisms for the "*evaluation of the effectiveness of the early childhood educational voucher*" scheme. The evaluation would help assess the feasibility of the one year extension initiative. However, without careful planning, this policy initiative will only extend access to preschool education and may ignore its quality (Tsai, 2002). This problem needs to be resolved.

#### Implementing the early childhood educational voucher scheme

The early childhood education voucher scheme has been implemented in Taiwan. The first appearance and distribution of the early childhood educational voucher scheme in Taiwan was advanced by Mr. Chui-Bian Chen in 1997. At that time, he was the Mayor of Taipei City and also was the first Mayor representing the Democratic Progressive Party. He promoted the scheme as a means of increasing young children's access to preschools by reducing the financial burden on parents. In 1998, the Education Bureau of Taipei City set up the early childhood educational voucher policy initiative for children registered in Taipei. In the same year, the mayor of Kaohsiung City also announced the provision of the early childhood educational

voucher scheme for children registered in Kaohsiung. Pressure followed from other cities and counties for central government to develop the scheme to other areas. In 2000, a voucher policy was therefore institutionalized at a national level in Taiwan by the Ministry of Education.

The early childhood voucher scheme provides ten thousand Taiwanese dollars (about 165 British pounds) per school year to five-year-old children who are registered and enrolled in legally registered private kindergartens or nurseries. Children, who are in public schools or are receiving different forms of preschool programmes such as in-home care or through family support systems, are not eligible for educational vouchers. Therefore, the voucher scheme policy does not apply to all five-year-old children.

One of the purposes behind the voucher scheme is to narrow the gap between expensive private and public preschools by reducing how much parents have to pay for a private preschool education. Another intention behind the scheme is to encourage private schools to legally register their status. It is only registered preschools that may admit parents using vouchers. In order to register, the preschools have to fulfil certain standards and criteria that the Government has set. In this respect, the early childhood educational voucher scheme seems to be one way to improve the quality of preschool provision and eliminate social exclusion (Lu and Shih, 2000; Song, 2001).

However, in reality the voucher scheme has made very little difference to the choice of preschools that parents have made because it covers very little of the cost of private schooling. The average tuition fees for private preschools are more than three times

higher than public schools<sup>11</sup> and private preschools are in the majority<sup>12</sup> (Chiou, 1999b). The educational voucher policy initiative is easily accessible for families who can afford private preschool fees. For low-income families, however, the early childhood educational voucher scheme does not actually support their right of access to a choice of all preschools.

Another concern relating to the voucher scheme policy is that nearly half of the preschools in Taiwan are unregistered. That means that there are a limited number of legally registered preschools for all preschool aged children to attend. If the Government of Taiwan hopes to use educational vouchers to encourage parents to choose legally registered preschools, it will be necessary to expand the provision of public or legally registered private schools for parents to choose (Song, 2001). If this does not occur, many parents will still need to send their children to unregistered or illegally registered schools. Song (2001) and Tsai (2002) also found evidence of misleading information given to parents in selecting preschools. Unregistered or illegally registered schools often inform parents that they accept educational vouchers in order to attract parents to enrol their children in their preschools. As a result, parents tend to believe that the school must be legally registered. However in reality, the schools increase fees in order to cover the costs of the voucher scheme. As a result, the voucher scheme policy is neither improving the quality of preschool education nor reducing the financial burden on parents. Educational vouchers account for a huge amount of the educational budget every year. However, Song (2001) is concerned that because the voucher scheme costs so much there is a danger that the implementation

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<sup>11</sup> The average fees for public schools are NT 21,600 dollars per school year (about ten months). For private schools the fees are about NT 73,600 dollars.

<sup>12</sup> In 2002, there were 1,331 public kindergartens and 1,994 licensed private kindergartens. There were only 296 public nursery schools but 3,484 licensed private nursery schools. There were 1,627 public preschools and 5,478 private preschools.

of other policies, for example, the policy to extend compulsory education or combining kindergartens and nurseries, may be affected. For parents, using early childhood educational vouchers may influence their choices. If parental choices of preschools are actually widened by the fact that they are able to use educational vouchers, the aims of this scheme are achieved. On the other hand, if the voucher scheme makes little difference to the affordability of preschool education, then effectiveness and efficiency may need to be assessed and will be discussed in later chapters.

### **1.2.5 Conclusion**

There are many areas of concern that need to be addressed if the quality of preschool provision in Taiwan is to be improved. The inappropriate preschool regulations, high turnover rates of teachers, the number of unqualified teachers and unsuitable curricula all influence the quality of preschool education offered. It is parents who choose the preschool for their children in a real market. Whether parents are aware of the problems of preschool provision in Taiwan; whether they have enough knowledge and information for preschool programmes during the processes of making their decisions and how they engage the preschool market need to be explored. Their knowledge and expectations of preschool education and how they choose a preschool may therefore have important influences on the preschool provision that the providers deliver. If we intend to provide high quality preschool education for young children in Taiwan, we need to pay attention to parental perspectives so that they choose quality provision. How parents made their choices within an active market and what they chose for their children is the key focus of this research.



### **1.3 The structure of the thesis**

This introductory chapter explains the context and rationale of the research. In particular it examines why parental choice is important in the preschool market; what problems exist in preschool provision and the policy initiatives developed by the Taiwanese Government that aim to improve the quality of preschools.

Chapter Two provides a literature review that draws on two theoretical frameworks to refine the research questions. How parental choice of preschool may impact on the quality of the provision is considered and how far rational choice theory can be used as a useful tool for analysing the process of choice is explored. This is followed by a review of the research relating to preschool quality that will be used to explore the parents' criteria of choice.

Chapter Three describes the methodology of this research and provides a discussion of the research design, the design of research instruments, the process of collecting data and the strategies used to analyze the data. Problems in sampling and the difficulties in data analysis are also discussed. Finally, ethical issues, reliability and validity are examined.

Chapter Four presents the findings of individual case studies. Twelve parents' stories are presented in detail, in order to understand individual parents' criteria for choosing preschools and the influences on their choices. The twelve cases are divided into four different groups based on the degree of clarity of the criteria the parents used during the process of selecting a school. The four groups are: the "*Know what I want*" parents, the "*Know what I want but changed my mind*" parents, the "*Don't know what*

*I want but I will know it when I see it*” parents, and the “*Other people know better*” parents. Each case explains why the parents sent their children to preschools, their criteria for choosing preschools, the influences on their choices and how satisfied they were with their choices. The aim is to understand how individual parents defined the quality of preschools when they made their choices.

Chapter Five discusses the findings through cross-case analysis by comparing and synthesizing eighteen case studies. The findings focus on addressing research questions to provide a holistic understanding of the research.

Chapter Six begins by discussing how far the choice processes of parents in this research may be considered rational. I then discuss the influences on both the parents’ process of choice and the decision itself. These influences are discussed in terms of the parents’ social and cultural capital, Chinese cultural values and the effects of globalisation. This exposes the issues of equality and equity which need to be addressed by the government. In addition, the similarities and differences in the criteria that Taiwanese parents used to choose preschools and the criteria from Western research are discussed, as well as how these impact on preschool provision. The thesis then returns to Government preschool policy and suggests changes that will improve the quality of preschool provision for Taiwanese preschool children. Finally, the chapter ends with some questions which are raised from the findings and which it would be fruitful to explore by further research.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Parental choice under market conditions**

The assumption behind introducing parental choice in education is that schools have to pay attention to the demands of students and parents in order to survive in a competitive market. By giving parents consumer rights in their choice teachers' motivation and school quality can be improved. The idea is that in a competitive market, educational providers will attempt to improve their standards in order to meet consumers' criteria (Gorard, 1997; Woods et al., 1998). If they fail to recruit enough pupils, they will be unable to compete in the market and go out of business. Therefore, introducing parental choice plans to educational market is a way to promote competition and increase the accountability of schools to parents (Maddaus, 1990; Wikeley, 1998; Woods et al., 1998). It can also improve student performance (Murnane 1984 cited in Maddaus, 1990).

Bridge (1978 cited in Maddaus, 1990) lists several optimal conditions for choice plans, including:

- individuals have incentives to shop aggressively;
- individuals are well informed about marketed conditions;
- there are many competing suppliers of the goods and services people want;
- there is some excess capacity in the system so that people have true choices;
- the quality of goods and services is easily measured; and
- the product or service is relatively inexpensive and purchased frequently.

However, these are optimal conditions. Parents may not have a pure choice if they

lack one or more conditions. Information imperfections involving inadequate sources of information, the difficulty of measuring educational quality and the infrequency of educational choices appear in the process of parental choice and need to be considered by policy analysts (Maddaus, 1990).

From the 1990s, parental choice has been of increased interest in academic research and has focused on policy concerns, particularly in Western research. Many studies have concentrated on researching parents' reasons for choice and the issues of equity. However, most research (such as Brain and Klein, 1994; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Hou, 2002; Hughes et al., 1994; Martin, 1995; Woods et al., 1998) into parental choice of schools has been conducted in quasi-markets which are strongly politically regulated. Their research looked at parental choice in secondary schools (Brain and Kelin's study, Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe's study; Hou's study and Martin's study; Woods, Bagley and Glatter's study) or primary schools (Hughes, Wikeley and Nash's study) which are compulsory education. The standards of secondary and primary schools have been under the control of central Government. Parents make their choice under a certain range of qualities and conditions. Thus, parents do not have true choices because it is highly regulated under certain conditions. If policy-makers and administrators have different views on educational goals, with the limited choices, parental choice may not have a significant influence on school provision. In this situation, the government still has the main influence on the quality of school provision.

However, preschool education in Taiwan is not compulsory and only one third of preschools are public schools. The provisions of preschools in Taiwan are diverse and parents can choose different teaching approaches or physical facilities depending on

their preferences. They have the right and freedom to decide where to send their children for preschool education. When they have various choices, the process of making their decision may be difficult and complex. The parents' role and parents' actions during the process of choosing preschools in Taiwan may be different from other research (such as Brain and Klein, 1994; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Hughes et al., 1994; Martin, 1995). Their expectations of preschool education, or alternatively the kind of preschool education on offer to them (that influences their expectations), may influence the kind of preschools they choose in the market. In the conditions of the competitive market, their criteria for choosing preschools may shape preschool provision and affect the preschool quality in Taiwan.

Research by Vincent and Ball (2001) looked at how parents placed themselves in the preschool market by looking at working parents' choices of care for their preschool children. This paper focused on analyses of the issues involved in the decision of whether to go back to work or stay at home. The tensions between work and domestic responsibilities influenced their emotional feelings, which appeared to affect the processes of engaging in a market transaction in buying care for their young children (Vincent and Ball, 2001). However, the extended family is still popular in Taiwan. Even for a nuclear family, it is common for young children to be looked after by their grandparents. The emotional feeling of buying care for their young children may not affect the processes of engaging the preschool market. In addition, Taiwanese parents take education very seriously (Hou, 2002) and are afraid that their children will fall behind if they do not have a good preschool education (Lin, 2002). Therefore, preschools are not only expected to provide the service of caring for young children but also provide education to them. Parents' concerns in Taiwan and the processes of decision making may be different from the parents in Vincent and Ball's study. In

Taiwanese families, caring is a shared responsibility (Yunus, 2005). Therefore when working parents choose to send their children to a preschool, their major concern is about the future benefit for the child rather than the immediate benefit for the parents (which may be care based). This changes the emotional framework informing parents' decision making. Therefore, Taiwanese parents may be in a better position to make a rational choice.

## **2.2 Theoretical framework for this research**

This research aims to look at the process of parents choosing preschools to understand what criteria parents use for choosing a preschool in order to probe how parental choice influences the quality of preschool provision in Taiwan. My assumptions in this research are that first, the preschool market in Taiwan is a free market. If preschools want to survive in a competitive market the demands from parents need to be met. The criteria parents use for choosing preschools may affect the supply of preschools. Parental choice, therefore, could have significant impact on preschool provision in Taiwan.

Second, preschool education is not compulsory in Taiwan and parents have free choice. The assumption has to be that parents will choose the best and most appropriate preschool for their children, therefore, they may be considered to be acting rationally. If parents decide to send their children to preschool, they will have certain considerations and expectations for preschool education. They may compare qualities of schools during the process of engaging with the preschool market. They will calculate the benefits and risks to make their choice. Rational choice theory could provide a way of understanding how each individual calculates the benefits and costs

in making his or her judgment in the market.

The third assumption is that high quality preschool education has an important impact on children's development and there is ample evidence to indicate what quality preschool education looks like (Abbott, 1994; David, 1999; Podmore, 2004; Sylva et al., 2003). Therefore, it might be assumed that parents acting rationally will choose high quality preschool education. However, we do not know what the criteria Taiwanese parents use when choosing preschools in a free market situation. Thus, it is necessary to explore the research which discusses preschool quality in order to understand what parents might be looking for when choosing a preschool in a free market and whether parents' definition of quality matches that identified in the literature.

### **2.2.1 Rational choice theory**

Scott (1995) mentions that in reality, it is not possible for individuals to achieve all their goals or preferences, they have to make choices in everyday life. Rational choice theory is a theory to explain an individual's decision making and actions. The theory tells us what we have to do in order to achieve our aims (Elster, 1986). Abell (2000:223) provides a broad interpretation:

*Rational choice theory invites us to understand individual actors as acting, or more likely interacting, in a manner such that they can be deemed to be doing the best they can for themselves, given their objectives, resources, and circumstances, as they see them.*

Rational choice theory was originally developed by economists and philosophers and

there is a vast literature (Martin, 1995). According to Zey (1998), rational choice theory has been developed from neoclassical economic theory, utilitarian theory and game theory. The fundamental core of rational choice theory is that social interaction is a process of social exchange (Scott, 1995; Zey, 1998). Scott elaborates by saying that it is the interaction involved in the exchange of goods and services, the exchange of approval and certain other valued behaviours. From economic considerations, rational choice involves an attempt to calculate and to balance the costs and rewards of various actions that a person undertakes. These rewards and costs are available to individuals in everyday life. The transaction takes place when an individual considers the rewards gained as being exactly equal to the costs incurred.

Rational choice theory assumes that individuals will choose actions rationally, based on prioritizing preferences and values to maximize benefits or rewards, and minimize costs or risks (Coleman and Fararo, 1992; Scott, 1995; Zey, 1998). Thus, rational individuals have their goals and make their decisions after all rewards and costs have been weighed. In principle, they would have 'perfect knowledge' and use their knowledge in the best way to achieve their goals (Goldthorpe, 1998; Elster, 1986). Individuals do make comparisons in their everyday actions (Scott, 1995). They will make comparisons among pairs of possible actions in order to have their hierarchies of preferences (Zey, 1998) or preference orderings (Scott, 1995) before deciding what to do. They choose the action with an expectation of the best outcome (Coleman and Fararo, 1992; Scott, 1995; Zey, 1998). The action can only be described as not rational if the best outcome happens by accident or coincidence (Scott, 1995).



### Certainty and uncertainty

The above explanation is an ideal. In reality, rational choice theorists argue that it can be difficult for a social scientist to model an individual's assessment of the overall balance of rewards and costs. Zey (1998) and Goldthorpe (1998) argue that in the real world, limited information, incomplete knowledge and uncertain situations cannot be avoided. Therefore, the conditions under which rational choice theory is exercised have been divided into certainty and uncertainty (Scott, 1995; Zey, 1998). Under conditions of certainty, choices are the results of individual beliefs, values, self-interests and preferences. Conditions of certainty assume that individuals have knowledge of all possible outcomes and make the best choice to match the aims of their actions. They are expected to be able to consider all probabilities and decide the various outcomes. Individuals also have to compare all certain criteria to modify calculable risks. However, conditions of certainty in rational choice are an ideal. Choices involve many uncertain variables and it is difficult to anticipate comprehensive possibilities. Zey (1998) believes that many people may not be able to rank the complex options that exist and may not know what their choices would be. On the other hand, Goldthorpe (1998) mentions that even rational people have limited information and uncertain knowledge under a risk situation, it is still supposed that they will try to have as much information as they can, and calculate as accurately as possible in each situation in order to maximize their expected utility. As a result, strategic action as a rational form of action may need to be applied to calculate the risks and benefits (Elster, 1986; Scott, 1995; Goldthorpe, 1998; Zey, 1998).

Individuals compare probabilities and use strategic actions to make a preference order for their choices. Parental choice for a preschool involves a great many unknown or

uncertain variables and it may be difficult to estimate the possible outcomes or risks in choosing a preschool. For example, children attending bilingual schools may not have similar outcomes in Chinese literacy as the children who attend traditional Chinese speaking preschools. On the other hand, if children do not learn English when they are young, it may be more difficult to learn when it is a compulsory subject at the primary school level. It is very difficult for parents to anticipate outcomes of their children's achievements. Therefore, what influences their strategic actions and their order of preference, what influences the micro level of an individual's actions under the certain and uncertain conditions and how the macro level values, culture and social class, affect individuals' actions, has to be taken into account.

#### Macro-micro relationship

Rational choice theory not only provides an explanation of an individual action but also becomes the prominent description of social action (Scott, 1995). Rational choice theory is the transition between the micro level of individual action and the macro level of system behaviour. It assumes that complex social phenomena can be explained in terms of the elementary individual actions (Scott, 1995). Coleman and Fararo (1992) believe that social outcomes are produced by individual actions. Consequently, organizational and societal changes come about through individual changes (Scott, 1995; Zey, 1998). On the other hand, an action by one individual actor may depend on what others have done, are doing or are expected to do, and therefore may generate the macro outcomes (Abell, 2000; Zey, 1998). Social norms have to be considered in individual actions (Elster, 1986). Therefore, collective action, social norms and social structure may also affect the actions or choices of rational individuals (Scott, 1999). Rational individuals may compare their values and

outcomes with others and their actions may be influenced by social norms, cultural values and social class resources of individuals. Scott (1995) and Goldthorpe (1998) believe that particular cultures have certain values and any individual choice may reflect the cultural values to which they are attached.

In the context of this research, Taiwanese culture emphasizes the family as the prototype of all social organizations with values such as maintaining family harmony that are reflected in the choices that family members make (Hofstede, 1997). Thus, each family member has an obligation to be concerned about the other members' thoughts and feelings. In a Chinese family, every member relies on each other and trusts one another's values and opinions. Therefore, when they make a decision, family members' advice and suggestions are taken into consideration.

For parental choice of preschools, individual parent's values and the views of other family members affect their criteria for choosing a preschool. Their choice may influence the supply for preschool education. On the other hand, the kind of preschool provision available may also influence an individual parent's preference for a preschool and affect her or his choice. How parental choices affect preschool provision and how Taiwanese cultural values translate into the actions of individual parents, are at the core of the micro-macro linkage in this research.

### **2.2.2 Preschool quality**

Another function of the theoretical framework is to explore the concept of quality in relation to preschool settings. There is a wealth of research evidence (mainly located in Western countries) that informs us why high quality preschool education is

important for young children and how that quality might be defined (Helburn and Howes, 1996; Masse and Barnett, 2002; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999; Reynolds et al., 2002; Schweinhart, 2004; Sylva et al., 2003).

### The significance of quality in preschools

There is no doubt that if children's basic health, nutritional, psychological and social needs are being met they will develop their potential to the maximum. Children's learning and development are influenced by the experiences that they have in the multiple environments surrounding them; the importance of early learning experiences to subsequent academic outcomes has been recognized by a number of academic writers (Ceglowski, 2004; Dahlberg et al., 1999; David, 1999; Dowling, 2000; Podmore, 2004). It has been shown, that good early childhood programmes have short- and long-term influences on children's development (Dahlberg et al., 1999). High quality programmes can improve children's health, cognitive skills, achievement, motivation and school readiness in the short term, and bring about better educational attainment and reduction in remedial services and criminal behaviour in the long term (Helburn and Howes, 1996; Reynolds et al., 2002). Some studies have provided evidence to suggest that high quality early childhood programmes can improve children's educational and socioeconomic status in the future (Masse and Barnett, 2002; Reynolds et al., 2002; Schweinhart, 2004; Sylva et al., 2003). The High/Scope Perry preschool study (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997) and the Abecedarian Preschool Project (Masse and Barnett, 2002) provide evidence to show that amongst children who experience high quality preschool programmes there is greater school completion, greater earning potential, good social behaviour and reduced criminal acts in adulthood.

The Cost, Quality and Child Outcome (CQO) Study in the United States found children who attended higher quality child care centres performed better on cognitive and social skills; in addition, the influences of child care quality were important for children from wide range of family backgrounds (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999). The CQO study was a longitudinal study and began in 1993. It involved 826 children (ages four) from four states (California, Colorado, Connecticut and North Carolina) who had centre-based care. Children were individually assessed to learn the effects of programme characteristics on children's development. The study was designed to examine the influence of child care centres on children's development during their preschool years and the formal primary education system. The quality of the learning environment, teacher-child relationships, and teacher sensitivity and responsiveness in the child care centres was measured by the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale<sup>13</sup> (ECERS; Harms and Clifford, 1980); the Caregiver Interaction Scale<sup>14</sup> (CIS; Arnett, 1989); the UCLA Early Childhood Observation Form<sup>15</sup> (ECOF; Stipek et al., 1992) and the Adult Involvement Scale<sup>16</sup> (AIS; Howes and Stewart, 1987). The findings were summarised in the following four statements. First, high quality child care is an important element in achieving a national goal of having all children ready for school. Second, high quality child care continues to positively predict children's performance well into their school careers. Third, children who are at a risk of not doing well in school are affected more by the quality of child care experiences than other children. Finally, higher quality child care experiences in terms of both

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<sup>13</sup> This will be discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>14</sup> The CIS was developed by Arnett (1989) and designed to observe the interactions between caregivers and children. It has twenty-six items which are grouped to produce four subscales: positive relationships, permissiveness, punitiveness and detachment.

<sup>15</sup> The ECOF examines five areas: child initiation, academic emphasis, discipline, performance pressure and negative evaluation.

<sup>16</sup> The AIS was designed to measure increasing complexity and reciprocity in adult-child interaction.

classroom practices and teacher-child relationships enhance children's cognitive skills, classroom behaviour and social skills throughout their early school years. The researchers concluded that it was necessary to improve the quality of child care experiences, if children are to be ready for school.

The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) Project in England also provides clear evidence of the positive effects of high quality preschool settings on children's development (Sylva et al., 2003). The project was the first major European longitudinal study of children's intellectual, social and behavioural development between the ages of three and seven. It began in 1997 and involved 3000 children from different backgrounds in a variety of preschool settings. The ECERS-Revised (ECERS-R; Harms et al., 1998, 2005), the ECERS-Extension (ECERS-E; Sylva et al., 2003) and the Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS; Arnett, 1989) were used to measure the quality of each setting. Interviews were conducted with all centre managers and twelve Local Authority coordinators in order to provide profiles of the preschool centres which included group size, staff-child ratio, staff training, aims, policies, curriculum, parental involvement etc. A control group of children with no, or minimal, preschool experience were included when the original cohort started school. The major finding from the study was that having some preschool experience, as opposed to none, enhances children's development. In addition, it showed that high quality preschool experience leads to better intellectual and social/behavioural development of children in primary schools. Moreover, children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit significantly more from high quality preschool experiences. The researchers suggested that if disadvantaged children had equal access to high quality preschool programmes, it could provide these children with a better start at school. Therefore, investing in high quality preschool programmes could be an effective means of

breaking cycles of disadvantage (Sylva et al., 2003).

Whilst most studies showing the effectiveness of the high quality of preschool programmes have been conducted in what might be called developed countries (see Helburn and Howes, 1996; Reynolds et al., 2002; Wylie and Thompson, 2003) Myers (2004) reviewed fifteen longitudinal studies of preschool programmes in Colombia, Brazil, Turkey, Morocco, India, Argentina, Chile and Peru. Whilst individually these studies were not focused on aspects of quality, Myers concluded from his review that high quality preschool programmes had important effects on learners' attitudes and children's development and that early intervention programmes have a positive effect on school progress and achievement in the early years of primary school. However, the structural conditions and the quality of primary schooling can moderate the potential effects of improved school readiness on school progress or performance in these developing countries.

### Key dimensions of quality

Having established that high quality early years provision leads to improved outcomes for children, it is important to understand the key dimensions of quality as defined in these studies.

#### ***- Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale***

The most widely used and best developed observational instrument for measuring indicators of quality in early childhood care and education is the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS). ECERS was originally developed by Thelma

Harms and Richard Clifford during the late 1970's and published in 1980 in the United States (Brophy and Statham, 1994; Williams, 1995). It has been used to measure the quality of preschool settings in terms of both process and structural features in more than twenty countries which include Singapore, Germany and Chile (Sheridan and Samuelsson, 2001; Espinosa, 2002; Sylva et al., 2004; Law et al., 2004) and in the EPPE project in the UK and the CQO study in the United States (see above).

ECERS was designed to provide an overall picture of a preschool environment and created to be a relatively short and efficient means for looking at quality and for planning improvement (Brophy and Statham, 1994; Williams, 1995). The scale uses forty three items and covers seven areas: space and furnishings, personal care routines, language and reasoning, activities, social interaction, organization and routine, and adults working together. Each item carries a possible rating from 1 (inadequate) to 7 (excellent). It can be used with one room or one group of children aged two and a half to five years old. The observations and rating take approximately two hours (Harms et al., 1998). The scale was revised (ECERS-R) in 1997 and in 2003 the EPPE research team developed the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Extension (ECERS-E) to supplement the ECERS-R to assess the quality of curricular provision. ECERS-E includes four new subscales: Literacy, Mathematics, Science and Diversity (Sylva et al., 2003, 2006).

ECERS provides a helpful method of categorizing and highlighting many aspects of the preschool environment which have a bearing on 'quality' (Brophy and Statham, 1994). It provides both researchers and practitioners with a systematic way of recording certain observable aspects of child care settings. Brophy and Statham (1994)



expressed concerns that the observation takes place at one particular point in time and is based on the current situation that is observed or reported by staff. The time of the visit and who amongst the staff and children is observed may also affect the scoring. Furthermore, as rating scales involve subjective action and depend on the observer's values and understanding about ECERS (Brophy and Statham, 1994), this scale has been examined for reliability and validity by many researchers (Harms et al., 2005; Sylva et al., 2003) and it is broadly accepted and used as a reliable and valid instrument for measuring quality in early childhood programmes (Sheridan and Samuelsson, 2001; Espinosa, 2002; Sylva, et al., 2003, 2004; Law et al., 2004).

***- the relations of structural and process quality***

In the EPPE project (Sylva et al., 2003, 2004), researchers found that children made more progress in preschool centres where staff had higher qualifications and good training. This was also linked with better outcomes in pre-reading and social development at age five. Similarly, Roseman (1999) points out that caregivers and teachers who participated in early childhood college courses were not only more knowledgeable about children's needs but also more sensitive and involved with children than those who had not attended these courses. Therefore, professional training can help teachers to shape their knowledge, which will affect the instructional activities and have an effect upon classroom quality.

Cryer et al. (1999) and Mooney et al. (2003) suggest that lower child-teacher ratios (fewer children per member of a teacher) provided better quality childcare and had a positive influence on classroom process quality in preschool programmes. A low child-teacher ratio allows children to have more support and attention from their

teachers and children appear less apathetic and distressed. On the other hand, if caregivers or teachers have many children to care for, the interactions with children will become brief and cursory (Mooney et al., 2003; Wyliw and Thompson, 2003). Thus child-teacher ratios influence the quality of interaction between teachers and children. This in turn may affect children's social and emotional development.

Phillipsen et al. (1997) discovered in the CQO study that if a school had good child-teacher ratios, more highly qualified teachers who had a moderate amount of experience, and higher wages; then the process quality was higher in the classrooms of the school. They also point out that structural features are affected by a variety of influences, such as government regulations, central (setting) policies, and economic climate. They explain that child-teacher ratios, group size, teachers or caregivers' training programmes and education are mandated by state regulations; while curriculum, staff wages and parent fees are decided by schools.

Cryer et al. (1999) provide a conceptual model in which the structural features can be categorized as proximal or distant (see Figure 2.1). This model represents the process quality of early childhood education as being embedded with various influences including structural features of the classroom, the institution (school) and the community. The more proximal variables have a greater impact on process quality. The outer sphere represents the national cultural or economic conditions which have the least influence on process quality in the classroom. At the other extreme, structural variables that exist in the classroom have the most powerful impact on process quality. That is not to deny the influences of the country and region, which can be strong, for example through regulation or economic status, but the influences of these variables can be reduced at the institution or classroom level, if institution

staff have appropriate capabilities.

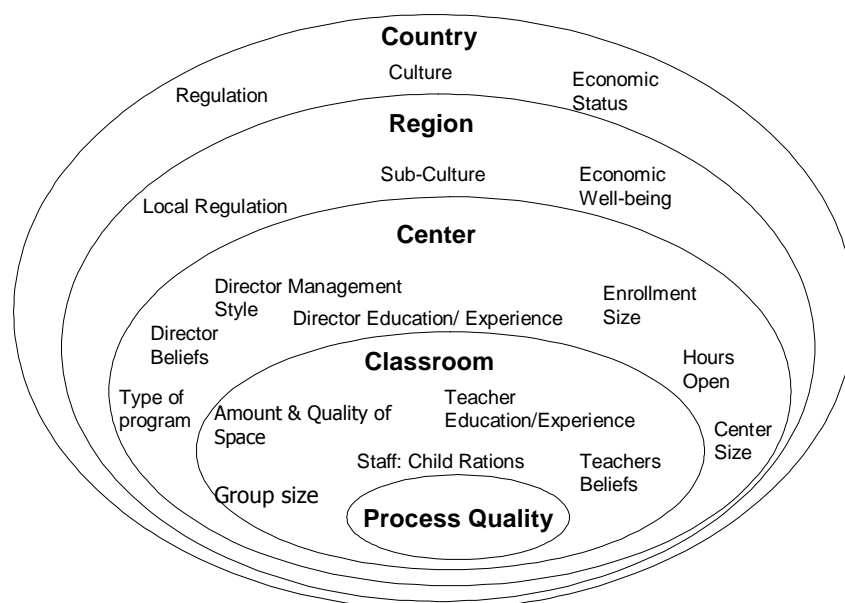


Figure 2.1: Spheres of Influence on early care and education (Cryer et al, 1999)

Now Cryer's model can be applied to the Taiwanese context. In Taiwan, the central government stipulates the preschool regulation that defines the general aims of the preschool curriculum, staff qualifications, child-teacher ratios, indoor and outdoor space, and safety but the detail of assessing the preschool quality remains the responsibility of local governments. Curriculum plans and pedagogy, teachers' salaries, the use and arrangement of the physical environment and preschool facilities are decided by preschool providers. Their decisions influence teachers' attitudes and motivation to their work and therefore teachers' retention (Lin, 2002; Phillipsen et al., 1997; Wei, 2002). Teachers' knowledge, attitudes and motivation in turn will influence how they interact with children and the experiences that the children have in the classroom. In addition, high quality structural features can actually support process features. So whilst structural features in a preschool programme may not have

a direct influence on children's development and outcomes, it can influence children's experiences in the classroom. The quality of process features can in turn affect the outcomes of children's learning and development in preschool programmes. So process and structure features both have strong connections to the kinds of experiences children will have in the preschool and influences on children's outcomes.

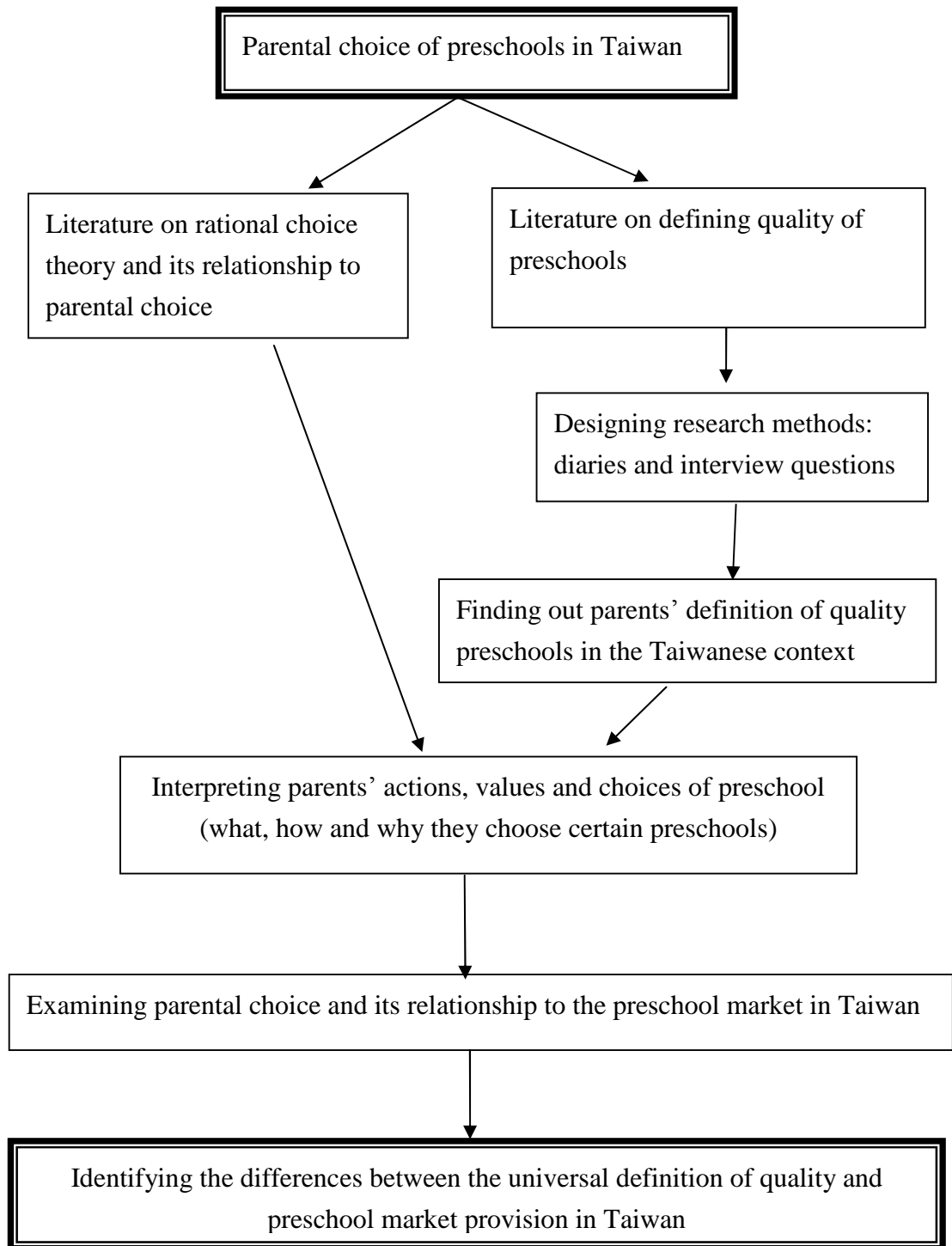
However, if we want to improve preschool quality, the influences from central and local governments, policy makers, centre managers and teachers or caregivers need to be considered. The issue of quality improvement is complex. Cryer et al. (1999) examined the relations between structural and process quality from four countries which were Germany, Portugal, Spain and the United States. They collected information of structural features at classroom and centre level, and used rating scales, the ECERS (Harms and Clifford, 1980) and the CIS (Arnett, 1989) to measure early care and education (ECE) process quality. The research found that there was no great difference in process quality of preschools between the four countries; however, they emphasised different structures and influenced the results of structural quality. For example, the United States tendency emphasised more stringent ratios than were found in the other three countries. In Germany, higher levels were found in teacher experience, teacher tenure, and director experience than in the United States. However, the findings show a negative relationship between teacher experience and process quality in Germany, while the relationship was positive in the other three countries. In the United States and Spain, there was a moderate relation between teacher wages and ECERS results but not in Germany and Portugal. Cryer et al. (1999) concluded that no particular structural feature has a powerful influence on ECE process quality. Because different countries emphasised different structural features,

Cryer's research team suggested that planning ECE process quality improvement needs to consider many different structural features in the specific national system.

In Taiwan, preschool education is in a competitive market. Taiwanese parents are often seen as consumers who make choices about preschool education. Within an active market, their emphasis on preschool quality may be different from the above studies. How they define preschool quality and how they are informed of preschool quality have powerful effects on preschool provision. Policy makers assume that parents want to purchase high quality preschools for their children so they should be able to demand this from the market, and the market (in principle) should increase the quality of the supply. In the Taiwanese context of parents choosing their children's preschools, the providers also have to supply quality provision in order to survive in a competitive market. Taiwanese parents as consumers inevitably compare the supply of preschools. If parents make their choices rationally, they may seek a preschool by maximising benefits and minimising costs. If parents have enough information and knowledge about choosing quality preschools, the quality of preschool provision may (assuming that demand determines supply) be improved. However, in reality, Cryer and Burchinal (1997) said this is not always the case. In the CQO study, the researchers found that parents were not well-informed consumers and did not accurately judge child care quality (Helburn and Howes, 1996). Is it the same situation when Taiwanese parents choose preschools for their children? The question of what benefits Taiwanese parents look for; what indicators of a quality they choose for their children; whether individual parents have different concerns and criteria for choosing preschools, and what influences them in making their rational choices will be explored in this research.

### **2.2.3 Summary**

In this chapter, I have discussed the value of rational choice theory when trying to explore parental choice in a Taiwanese market context, and I have reviewed some studies related to how process and structural features of preschools influence children's learning and developments and how preschool quality is measured. The literature relating to "quality" of preschool provision is used to design research instruments in order to elucidate what criteria Taiwanese parents use for choosing preschool. Rational choice theory may help to explain individual parents' action in terms of the processes of their decision making (Figure 2.2).



**Figure 2.2: Applying theoretical frameworks to this research**

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **3.1 Methodological framework of this research**

This research explores the processes of parental choice of preschools and interprets their actions in order to understand their criteria for choosing preschools and the influences upon their choices. According to Bryman (2004), qualitative research provides a research strategy that usually emphasizes the words with which individuals interpret actions and the social world, and it may be an appropriate method to be employed on social research. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) mention that qualitative research involves using case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, artefacts, cultural texts and productions, plus observational, historical, and visual texts to describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives. It attempts to make sense of the meaning in people's behaviour (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Bryman, 2004).

#### **3.1.1 The role of theory in this research**

This research is concerned with parents' actions and values in selecting preschools, and tries to gain access to parents' thinking about preschool education and hence to interpret their definition of quality of preschools in terms of their actions in selecting preschools. Cohen et al. (2000) believe that individual behaviours can only be understood by understanding individuals' interpretations of the world around them. Therefore, meaningful social action needs to be interpreted from the point of view of the actors (Bryman, 2004). The epistemological position, adopted in this research is interpretivism. Interpretivism is concerned with the interpretation of human action



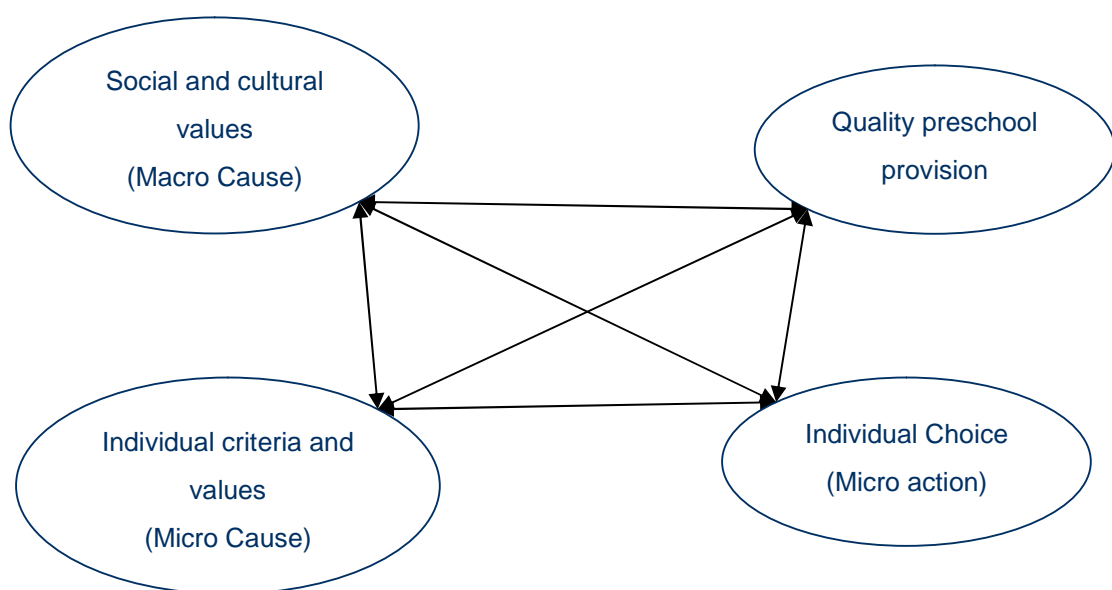
(Bryman, 2004; Cohen et al., 2000; Scott and Usher, 1999) and as such relates to the aims of this research. This research applies rational choice theory and the definition of quality from the perspective of school effectiveness in order to interpret parents' actions and considerations during the process of choosing preschools for their children.

Parental choice of preschools may depend on parents' beliefs and values of quality in preschool education. On the other hand, Chinese culture has certain expectations about parental responsibility; there is competition in Taiwanese society and there are also values in Taiwanese culture that have been drawn from other cultures. These elements may shape parents' values and expectations of preschool education and therefore may affect their choices. So, when we try to understand individual parents' choices, the influences on their action and values have to be taken into account. On the other hand, individual preferences may help to construct preschool provision in Taiwan through a process of market competition. Constructionism is an appropriate way of explaining the process that informs this kind of position. In this research, it is related to the rational choice theory - micro and macro linkage in the Taiwanese context because rational choice theory rests on the assumption that individual actions can determine collective results. As Bryman (2004) stated,

*Constructionism is an ontological position that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. It implies that social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision... The researcher always presents a specific version of social reality, rather than one that can be regarded as definitive. Knowledge is viewed as indeterminate.* (Bryman, 2004: 17)

Rosenthal (1999) believes that 'cultural values and attitudes regulate childrearing

*values, developmental expectations and emotional orientations of caretakers, and their childrearing scripts for achieving valued developmental outcomes, as well as the physical and social settings of everyday life*’ (cited in Wise and Sanson, 2000: 3). Therefore, parents’ values and practices in children’s learning and development are influenced by what is adopted in their cultural values. These values may affect parental expectations of preschool education in Taiwan and influence their definition of a “quality” preschool. In terms of micro-macro linkage, these may also influence the supply and provision of preschools. When we explore parental choice for a preschool, we have to be concerned with cultural and global influences on individual parents’ criteria of “quality” preschools. Parents’ personal backgrounds may also affect their decision making. This research explores the process of parents choosing a preschool and understands how parents choose a school for their children and what influences their choices, in order to understand what factors construct preschool market provision in Taiwan. The effects of these micro-macro factors and their relationship to parental choice of quality preschool provision will be explored in the conceptual framework of this research, as illustrated in Figure 3.1.



**Figure 3.1: Conceptual framework of this research**

The next section explains how this framework influences the data collection methods and analysis for this research.

### **3.2 The research approach - A case study**

In order to probe parents' criteria for choice and their behaviour in choosing a preschool the research employs a case study approach. A case study is an exploration which uses in-depth data collection to gather rich information in context (Creswell, 1997). It provides unique examples of real people in real situations (in this case, real parents choosing preschools in a Taiwanese context), in order to understand the choice process more clearly (Cohen et al., 2000). By looking at individuals' reasons for choosing a particular preschool, the research aims to expand an understanding of parents' beliefs and values about preschool education. This is accomplished by investigating what criteria parents use to select a preschool; their definition of quality and how cultural and societal pressures influence their choice. The research questions addressed were:

- 1) What are the parents' expectations of preschool education?
- 2) What are their criteria for choosing a preschool?
- 3) What are the influences on the choice process?
- 4) To what extent, are they satisfied with their choice and have their expectations been met?

Stake (1994) proposes three classes of case study, intrinsic, instrumental and collective. An intrinsic case study tries to build a better understanding of a particular case. The purpose of an intrinsic case study is not to understand some abstract

construct or generic phenomenon, or to build theory but to explore in depth the specific. An instrumental case study uses particular cases to provide in-depth evidence to support an exploration of an issue or refinement of theory. A collective case study has less interest in particular cases. A number of cases may be analyzed jointly in order to investigate the general phenomena. Because the aims are different, the criteria for choosing cases are different. For an intrinsic case study, the researcher is interested in the specific opportunity offered by the case. Issues that emerge can then be explored through other cases. In contrast to the intrinsic case study, in an instrumental or collective case study cases are chosen as good examples of a general condition or phenomena.

However, Stake also argues that it is difficult to categorize studies neatly into one of these three types. He sees the three categories “*as heuristic more than functional*” (1994: 238). The purpose of this research is to explore the phenomenon of preschool provision by examining individual parents’ choices. However, macro-level influences such as the values of Chinese culture and Taiwanese society, and the stress of global competition may construct micro- level individual behaviour and beliefs which affect choice. Thus, it is necessary to have a better understanding of individual cases, and how these different influences come into effect. Different parents with different backgrounds were selected in order to gain a better understanding of the general phenomenon of parental choice in Taiwan.

Verma and Mallick (1999) suggest that one problem of a case study approach is that the findings can not be replicated by other researchers as it is time constrained. Another problem is that the cases selected for the study may not be truly representative of the whole population. Both have implications for the possibility of

generalizing from the findings. Yin (2003) argues that having as many cases as possible is one solution and in this research eighteen cases were used in order to expand the findings to enhance an understanding of the phenomena. However, the purpose was not to generalize but to try and understand the phenomenon of parental choice of preschool provision in the Taiwanese context.

### **3.3 Finding parents**

This research focused on the process of parents choosing preschools in order to probe parents' initial perceptions of quality as reflected in their criteria for choice and any changes in those perceptions after their children had school experience. Therefore, parents whose first child entered preschool in 2005 were the main participants. It was a longitudinal study conducted from April 2005 to May 2006. The original intention was to access parents through the preschools by visiting some preschools on their open days<sup>17</sup> and use questionnaires to collect parents' general criteria for choosing a school. In addition, in-depth interviews would be carried out with the individual parents to explore their expectations of preschool education. Visits were anticipated to five different preschools which had different characteristics and different approaches. For example, a bilingual approach, whole English language approach, theme approach, traditional approach (curriculum divided into different subjects), and Montessori approach. Because of my professional experience, it would not be difficult to access preschools. However, after making contact with some school staff it was found that it was not normal policy to have a formal open day for preschools in Taiwan. Parents can visit a school whenever it is convenient for them. Therefore, the strategy of accessing parents needed to be re-thought.

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<sup>17</sup> Preschool providers open their school and provide introduction to their potential costumers.

I used my social network to find parents who would be willing to participate in the research and also met the research criteria. All my relatives and friends were contacted by email to ask for an introduction to appropriate parents. Information about the research was also posted on the web in order to attract parents from diverse backgrounds.

The final group of parents were from Taipei and Miaoli. Taipei and Miaoli have different characteristics. Taipei is the capital city in Taiwan and has been strongly influenced by Western culture. On the other hand, Miaoli is a provincial city which may have a more traditional Chinese culture. It was thought that having parents from two different types of city would be helpful in exploring the background influences of the parents.

The hierarchy of the social classes in Taiwan is not clear; therefore, I tried to involve different professional, financial and educational backgrounds and family structures in order to have diverse information from the data. Some parents lived with their parents-in-law and also their brother or sister-in-law<sup>18</sup> and therefore family member's values may have had a strong influence on their choice. Different educational backgrounds of parents may lead to different expectations of preschool education. Furthermore, the highest family income in this research is five times greater than the lowest one and this may affect parents' criteria for choice of preschools.

The parents were all mothers, except Ming, because in Taiwan mothers take the main

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<sup>18</sup> In traditional Chinese culture the eldest son, after marrying, returns with his wife to remain in the parental home along with his unmarried brothers and sisters.

responsibility for choosing schools for their children. This is similar to other parts of the world. David et al's study (1997: 404) found that 'mothers had greater responsibility for organizing the education for young children'. In addition, in the study '*Gender Issues in Parental Involvement in Student Choices of Higher Education*', it was also found that mothers had the major and regular responsibility for their children (David et al., 2003). Although mothers were the main participants, in the interviews the influences on the mothers of other family members, for instance the child's father and grandparents, was explored.

Sixteen parents were involved at the first stage of this research, eleven from Taipei and five from Miaoli, but later three (from Taipei) withdrew as they decided not to send their children to preschools in 2005. However, in this first cohort there were no non-working mothers. This was thought to be an omission which may have skewed the study and I decided to involve some parents who were not working. I invited two parents who were housewives to participate in the research. In addition, through my social networks three more mothers became interested and asked if they could participate, which they did in the second stage of data collection. I believed it helped my case studies to be more diverse. These five extra parents only participated in the second stage; they did not complete the diary stage. The biographical information of the eighteen parents is given in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 The biographical information about the eighteen parents

Parent	Occupation (W: wife; H: husband)	Educational Level	Family Income/ Year/pound	Number of children	Care giver before schooling	Family structure	City
<b>Thirteen parents completed diaries and two phases of interview</b>							
<b>Ye</b>	Sales (W&H)	Two year college (W&H)	50,000	One	Paternal grandmother	Extended family	Taipei
<b>Ping</b>	IT support (W&H)	Bachelors' degree (W&H)	45,000	One	Maternal grandmother	Nuclear family	Taipei
<b>Hui</b>	Computing (W) Engineering (H)	Bachelors' degree (W & H)	41,000	One	Maternal grandmother	Nuclear family	Taipei
<b>May</b>	Junior high school teacher (W) Engineer (H)	Bachelors' degree (W) Masters' degree (H)	33,000	One	Child minder	Nuclear family	Miaoli
<b>Hsu</b>	IT personnel (W & H)	Masters' degree (W) Bachelors' degree (H)	33,000	One	Child minder	Nuclear family	Taipei
<b>Chen</b>	IT support (W) Civil service work (H)	Two year college (W) Bachelors' degree (H)	25,000	Two	Maternal grandmother	Nuclear family	Taipei
<b>Ming (husband)</b>	Staff in insurance company (W) Computing (H)	Two year college (W) Bachelors' degree(H)	25,000	One	Paternal grandmother	Extended family	Taipei
<b>Shieh</b>	Staff in Bank (W&H)	Bachelors' degree (W&H)	25,000	Two	Paternal parents	Extended family	Taipei
<b>Weng</b>	Sales assistant (W) Chief (H)	Two year college(W) Senior high school (H)	25,000	Two	Maternal grandmother	Extended family	Taipei



<b>Siao</b>	Pedlar in a market (W&H)	Senior high school (W) Junior high school (H)	20,000	Two	Foreign housemaid	Extended family	Taipei
<b>Chong</b>	Sales assistant (W) Staff in City council (H)	Bachelors' degree (W&H)	17,000	One	Child minder	Nuclear family	Taipei
<b>Ling</b>	Operator (W) Cartographer (H)	Two year college (W&H)	17,000	Two	Paternal grandmother	Extended family	Miaoli
<b>Sing</b>	Nurse (W) Technician in telecommunication firm (H)	Two year college (W) Senior high school (H)	12,000	One	Paternal grandmother	Extended family	Miaoli
<b>Five parents did not complete diaries but participated two phases of interview</b>							
<b>Jun</b>	Housewife (W) Medical doctor (H)	Masters' degree (W) Masters' degree (H)	40,000	Two	Herself	Nuclear family	Taipei
<b>Gao</b>	Accountant (W) Staff in a financial institution (H)	Bachelors' degree (W) Senior high school (H)	33,000	One	Foreign housemaid	Nuclear family	Taipei
<b>Jian</b>	Administrator in a hospital (W) Computing engineer (H)	Bachelors' degree (W) Masters' degree (H)	25,000	Two	Nursery	Nuclear family	Taipei
<b>Fang</b>	Housewife (W) Engineer (H)	Bachelors' degree (W) Masters' degree (H)	20,000	One	Herself	Nuclear family	Miaoli
<b>Jeng</b>	Operator in factories (W&H)	Senior high school (W) Junior high school (H)	10,000	Two	Herself	Extended family	Miaoli

I contacted the potential participants, using email to introduce myself and explain the purpose of the research in order to have initial communication with them before I went back to Taiwan to collect data. For those parents without computers I asked my friends or relatives to print my mail and give it to them. Information technology was also helpful in keeping in touch with the parents when I was in the UK. Some parents still contact me to ask questions about preschool education; for example when they were considering a change of school, or wanted to discuss their worries with me. All this helped my data collection.

### **3.4 The development of research instruments for collecting data**

#### **3.4.1 Diaries**

Diaries and interviews were employed for collecting data. A diary can be an appropriate instrument for getting information when the researcher is particularly interested in accessing thoughts and actions that occur when the researcher cannot be presented (Bryman, 2004). In this research, I wanted to engage in the process the parents were involved in when selecting preschools in order to understand their initial thoughts and actions over a period of time. However, I did not want to interrupt or influence their behaviour. Therefore, using diaries may be the natural way to understand the course of parents' decision making. In order to understand the processes of choosing preschools, parents were asked to record the general information about any preschools that they visited and note their opinions of the school's quality. If a parent did not visit any preschools before she made her decision, she was asked to write down what she knew about the preschool that she chose. The information in each diary was the reference point for planning individual interview

guides for the second stage of this research.

Bryman (2004) argues there is a risk that participants may not keep records diligently. In order to reduce this risk, the diary should be easy for participants to complete. Here, I devised a structure for the diary (see Appendix 2) to help the participants focus on the research questions. The diary had six open questions.

- 1) What kind of approach does this school use?
- 2) Why do you visit this school?
- 3) Please simply describe this preschool.
- 4) What do you like about this school?
- 5) What do you dislike about this school?
- 6) Would you send your child to this school? Why?

### **3.4.2 In-depth interviews**

#### Choosing in-depth interviews

Interviews can be used to understand an individual perspective (Fontana and Frey, 1994). They allow investigation and prompting of matters which cannot be observed (Wellington, 2000). In this research, I wanted to probe parents' definitions of quality preschool education which were about personal values which could not be observed. Interviews also allow reflection on the complexity of social behaviour and attempt to explain the 'causes' (Silverman, 2001). It helps us to understand the influences on parental choice of preschools and the development of their criteria. In-depth interviews were conducted with parents to explore their expectations of preschool education and the processes by which they chose a preschool. The interviews had a

clear list of issues to be addressed and questions to be answered which were developed from the parents' diaries and were also based on the literature review (see previous chapter). On the other hand, I wished the participants to develop their own ideas and respond more widely to my questions. Using focused but semi-structured interviews allowed me to probe a participant's thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings and perspectives (Wellington, 2000), to encapsulate the participants' interest (Denscombe, 2003), and to collect rich and detailed data (Bryman, 2004).

Two phases of interviews were adopted to encompass the development of decision making and action. The first phase focused on the parents' expectation of preschool quality and the second on their satisfaction with preschool provision. Each interview had an individual interview guide. The first phase of interviews was conducted at the beginning of the child's first school semester. Interview questions were based on the information given in the diaries completed during the selection process and investigated the parents' perspectives of preschool quality as well as the process of choice. This enabled me to deal with their different viewpoints whilst at the same time relating these to the conceptual framework of the research. Interviewing parents provided a platform for them to express themselves (Wellington, 2000) and gave me insight into how the parents identify the issues of preschool quality (Bryman, 2004). It also helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the values and beliefs influencing their choices. Moreover, from the different interviews, I could assess the relevance of parental perspectives to the broader question of choice. The first phase of interviews sought to explore research questions one to three:

- What are the parents' expectations of preschool education?

- What are parents' criteria for choosing a preschool?
- What are the influences on the choice process?

The second phase of interviews, which were developed from the first interviews, sought to explore the research question:

- To what extent, are they satisfied with their choice and have their expectations been met?

#### The development of interview guides

The interview guides in this research referred back to the diaries. The interview questions were based on the information given in the diaries and on theories of preschool quality from the literature. In the literature review chapter, the definition of quality in preschools has been discussed. The quality of preschools can be defined from the process and structural features of preschools. Quality is measured in terms of physical environment, quality of teachers and the curriculum of preschools. Consequently, the interview questions contained these areas. In addition, the internal and external social influences on their choice also had to be included. The interview questions covered a range of issues including: parents' expectation of preschool education, parents' criteria for choosing preschools, internal and external social influences on their choices, and the influences of preschool policy. Figure 3.2 shows the framework of the development and relationship of each interview question.

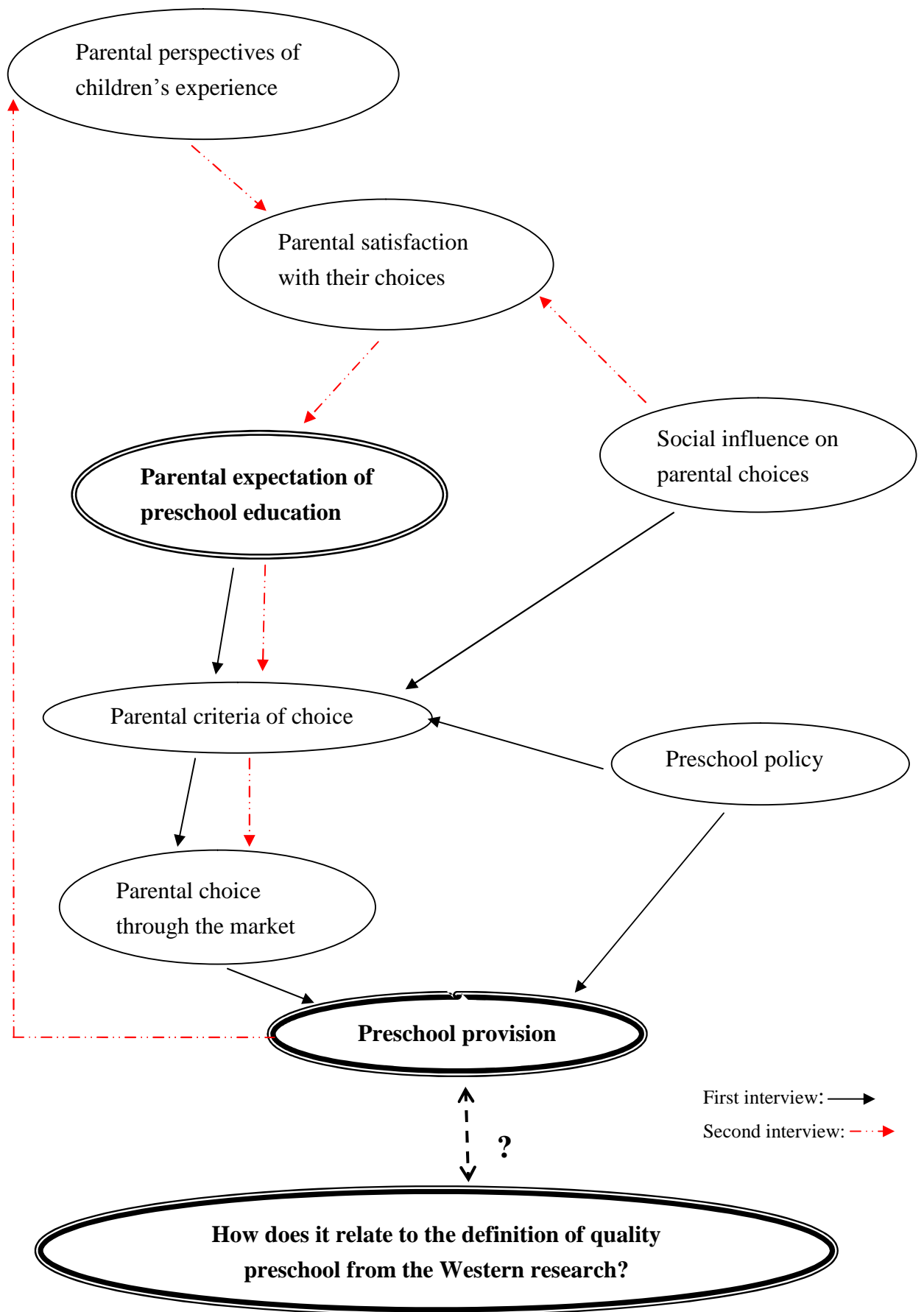


Figure 3.2: The relationship between theory and problem

Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest that a good interview is built up from three types of questions. First of all, the main questions create scaffolding for the interview and keep all questions linked to the topic. Secondly, asking probing questions clarifies and completes the answers. It helps to show the interviewer's interest in the interviewee's responses. The third type of question is that which elaborates the context of the answers and explores the implications of what has been said. The interview questions in this research involved all three types of questions. The first phase of interviews involved six main questions and the second phase of interviews had five main questions. Every parent had different probing and follow-up questions which depended on their responses during the interviews.

***- the first phase of interview questions***

The first phase of interviews focused on six main questions which were related to the research questions (see Table 3.2). Each question had sub-questions specific to the interviewee's diary entries, their responses to other interview questions and to the literature. The first area of question was "Why do you send your child to a preschool?" The purpose of this question was to probe participants' aims in wanting their child to have a preschool education. The second question was "What do you think your child needs to learn in a preschool?" This was to interrogate parents' expectations of preschool education.

To understand parents' perspectives of quality of preschools was a key purpose of this research. I wanted to find out whether parents had different concepts for quality preschools from the views of early childhood experts and whether different parents had different perspectives of quality preschools. The third focused question addressed:

“When you chose a preschool what were your concerns for a good preschool?” This question was designed to probe parents’ criteria for choosing preschools. Defining the quality of preschools could consider the structural and process features of preschools so I went on to ask parents’ opinions about their preferences for preschool curricula, teachers and the physical environment. In order to discover parents’ priorities in their criteria, the fourth interview question was “Why did you choose this particular preschool for your child”.

Table 3.2 The development of interview questions for the first phases of interviews

<b>Research questions</b>	<b>Focused areas of questions</b>
What are the parents’ expectations of preschool education?	Why do you send your child to a preschool?
	What do you think your child needs to learn in a preschool?
What are parents’ criteria for choosing a preschool?	When you chose a preschool what were you concerns for a good preschool?
	Why did you choose a particular preschool for your child?
What are the influences on the choice process?	How did you get the information about the preschools you were visiting or considering choosing?
	Can you talk about preschool policies such as educational vouchers, registered regulation for preschools and national evaluation, and the influences of these policies on your choices?

Another purpose of the first phase of interviews was to investigate the influence on parents’ choices. I sought to explore not only the influence of their social networks but also the influence of preschool policies on their choices. I asked “how did you get the information about those preschools you were visiting or considering choosing” and I particularly questioned their understanding of the early childhood educational voucher scheme, preschool registration and national evaluation for preschools



because those policies influence the quality of preschools in Taiwan.

Every individual parent had different sub-questions which depended on their diary entries. For example, from Chen's diary, she mentioned that one public preschool was recommended by her parents-in-law so I asked about the part her parents-in-law played in her choice of a preschool. Ye only recorded one preschool in her diary so I wanted to find out why she only visited one preschool and felt confident in choosing it. During Jun's interview, she mentioned several times that English teaching was a main criterion in choosing a preschool; thus, the interview question for her had to involve "why learning English is important in preschool stage". For the five parents who had not completed diaries, the interview questions were based on the literature, research questions and their responses during the interviews.

#### ***- the second phase of interview questions***

The issues raised by parents in the first phase of interviews were the reference points in planning research guides for the second phase of interviews. The second phase of interviews was conducted after children had had nearly one year in preschool, and investigated the parents' satisfaction with their choices. The interview questions focused on their satisfaction with their relationship with the teachers, the interaction between teachers and children, the changes in their children, the curriculum and the physical environment. This enabled me to probe any change in participants' criteria for schools' quality and possible causes for those changes to be noted. In addition, the influences on their satisfaction also had to be considered in order to probe the linkage between the micro level values of individual parents and macro level values of the family, Taiwanese society and Chinese culture.

The interviews started from the question of children's experience of preschool life. The rationale was that parents might feel more comfortable talking about their children's experience rather than the preschool provision. During the process of interviews, parents enjoyed talking about their children's experience and shared information with me very frankly. Five main questions were the focus of the second phase of interviews.

- Can you tell me about your child's experience in the preschool?
- How has your child changed / improved since she / he began attending this preschool?
- Can you tell me about the physical environment / teachers / curriculum in the preschool?
- Have you ever thought of moving your child to another preschool? Why?
- What are your suggestions when your friends look for a preschool for their children?

Sub-questions were based on the findings from the first phase of interviews. For example, after a few weeks schooling, Ming and Ping stopped sending their children to the school they had first chosen. The interview questions had to discover whether their children had continued in preschool education and whether they had returned to the same schools or gone elsewhere. Therefore, the main interview questions for individual parents were similar but the sub-questions were different.

### **3.5 The process of collecting data**

This is a longitudinal study which involved three stages of data collection. The processes and strategies in collecting data in this research involved diaries and two phases of interviews. The use of diaries enabled me to follow the process of parental selection of preschools and the in-depth interviews explored parents' assessment of preschool education and preschool quality. In Taiwan, the new semester normally starts in August or September. Parents need to make their decision on preschools before that and they might spend a few months in collecting information about preschools or visiting preschools. Therefore, parents were asked to complete the diaries from April 2005 and the first phase of interviews was conducted between the end of August and the end of September. The second phase of interviews explored parents' feelings and experiences of the preschools; therefore, it was conducted in April and May 2006 when the children had been at the preschool for nine month's. The schedule of collecting data was planned as shown in the following table:

Table 3.3 The schedule of data collection

	<b>Time</b>	<b>Data Collection Methods</b>	<b>Parents</b>
<b>Stage One</b>	04-2005 to 08-2005	Parents' diaries of choosing preschools	13 Parents who are looking for a preschool for their first child
<b>Stage Two</b>	08-2005 to 09-2005	Semi-structured interviews	13 participants were same as the first stage but involved 5 more new parents.
<b>Stage Three</b>	04-2006 to 05-2006	Semi-structured interviews	All 18 parents.

### **3.5.1 Stage One: Recording diaries**

#### Means

It is a part of Chinese culture that if we ask people for a favour, it is better to do it personally. Therefore, I went back to Taiwan in April 2005 to meet sixteen parents, to give them the diaries and stamped addressed envelopes individually, and to explain the research to them. They were asked to complete the diaries every time they visited a preschool in order to record the processes of selecting preschools. They had been asked to send the diaries to me after they had made their decision as to which preschools their child would attend. In this initial conversation some parents already expressed their preferences but had not made a final decision. They mentioned that they tended to collect information about preschools from their friends, relatives or colleagues; thus they had preferences in their minds. One parent (Chen) had visited some preschools and had already recorded her thoughts. I asked her to let me have her records and she was delighted to do so. Some parents asked if they might record the preschool information in the computer instead of writing in the diary and mail it to me. I accepted their requests. The diaries were completed from April 2005 to August 2005.

#### The difficulties of using diaries to collect data

I tried to avoid putting pressure on the participants although I sent emails or wrote post cards to remind the parents to complete the diaries. However, when I went back to Taiwan at the beginning of August 2005, only a few parents had sent the diaries back to me. I made follow up calls to the parents to remind them about the diaries. I

also made appointments for the first interviews. After that, eight diaries were posted to me and three participants sent their diaries by email but Hui and Chong gave me their diaries when I interviewed them.

Three parents told me that they could not participate in this research. Two of them decided not to send their children to preschools in 2005 because they considered their children to be too young to go to school. They decided to postpone their entry to school until 2006. Another parent left her daughter with her parents-in-law in a different city and the parents-in-law chose the preschool. As these parents did not choose preschools for their children, I did not follow them up for the second and third stage of data collection, and did not use their diaries. Table 3.4 shows the number of schools that parents had visited before making their decision in their diaries.

Table 3.4 The number of school visits made

<b>Parents</b>	<b>Number of settings</b>
<b>Ye</b>	1
<b>Hsu</b>	2
<b>Ling</b>	1
<b>Ming</b>	7
<b>Hui</b>	3
<b>Chen</b>	10
<b>Weng</b>	1
<b>Siao</b>	2
<b>Ping</b>	3
<b>Sing</b>	3
<b>Chong</b>	3
<b>Shieh</b>	2
<b>May</b>	3

### **3.5.2 Stage two and three: In-depth interviews**

#### Means

In the second stage, these thirteen parents were interviewed plus the five new parents. The first phase of interviews was conducted from August and September 2005.

The interviews were planned to be held when parents were beginning to think about preschools. However, the time of entering a preschool is very flexible in Taiwan so parents can send their children to a preschool at a time to suit themselves. It is not necessary to follow the particular schedule. As a result, when the interviews took place, some children had already been to their preschools for a couple of weeks or a couple of months; on the other hand, some children had not started their preschool life and some of them had just started. In addition, two of the parents had already stopped sending their children to a preschool because they could not get used to preschool life. None the less, the purpose of this research was to try to understand the process by which parents made choices of preschool. The time of children entering a preschool did not influence their criteria for making a choice but it might influence their responses. Parents whose children started their preschool life before the interview took place not only talked about their criteria for choosing preschools but also their children's experience in the preschools in the first interview.

The second phase of interviews was conducted from April and May 2006. Eighteen parents participated in the second phase of interviews. The interviews aimed to investigate parents' satisfaction with their choices in order to probe any changes of perspectives on the quality of preschools. The interview questions were designed by

referring to the data from the first phase of interviews. When the second phase of interview was conducted, two parents who had stopped sending their children to preschools in the first phase of interview had sent their children to different preschools. Another parent stopped sending her son to the preschool and considered sending her son to another preschool. I used emails and MSN to follow up her change of preschools after I returned to the UK. In addition, one parent had pressure from her parents-in-law to move her son to a cheap preschool. She sent emails to discuss her concerns with me when I was in UK. All the information from emails was very useful for my research.

The participants were interviewed face to face and took about forty minutes to one hour to complete. In order to help parents feel comfortable during the interview the location was chosen by the parents. All the parents were happy for the interviews to be recorded by MP3 recorder. The interviews were transcribed in detail in order to avoid unreliability (Wellington, 2000). Bryman mentions that tape recording helps to correct the natural limitations of memories and of the intuitive glosses that we might place on what people say in interviews, although transcription is time-consuming.

Bryman (2004) suggests that to transcribe the interviews early helps the researcher to be more aware of the emerging themes and allows them to be referred to in a more direct way in later interviews. Therefore, the transcription of each interview in this research was done immediately after interviewing in order for any missing information to be followed up. The transcripts were sent to the interviewees to check for inaccuracies. All the interviews and transcriptions were in Chinese. Two interviewees added some more information to the transcriptions and sent it back to me. Between the phase one and the phase two interviews I maintained contact with every

parent by email or letters and encouraged them to keep some notes about the schools. For example, the notes might include specific activities organized by the school, special communications with the teacher or head-teacher or particular things with which they are dissatisfied – anything that the participant thought of as relevant.

### The difficulties of doing interviews

Rubin and Rubin (1995) mention that one difficulty in attempting an interview is that people do not always want to share their lives with you. This was true of this research. It was not always easy for the parents to share their experience or opinions with me despite my earlier attempts to establish a relationship with them. One parent, in particular, proved difficult to interview. She tended to respond to interview questions by using very short phrases. For example, when I asked her, “Can you tell me about your child’s experience in this school?” She responded “I don’t know”. I followed up by asking her “what did he say to you about his preschool?” She responded “Nothing special”. Consequently, it was difficult to get worthwhile responses. For this parent, choosing a preschool seemed to be a spontaneous action without specific expectations. It was difficult for her to explain what for her, was taken-for-granted actions (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). I had to listen carefully to her response in order to probe issues and encourage her to share more information.

Interviews have to be conducted with care and sensitivity (Cohen et al., 2000). The interviewer has to concentrate during the interview in order to have good interaction with the interviewee. Whilst this was the intention the realities of interviewing mothers can be different. Sometimes, interruptions during the interviews, such as a phone call or their young children, ran the risk of affecting the quality of the



interviews. Two participants in this research had young children with them when the interviews took place. I made a note when interruptions happened in order to be able to continue the conversation and follow up the issues being discussed but it still influenced the quality of interview. However, parents were doing me a favour by participating in this research; thus it was difficult for me to ask parents to have someone looking after their children during the interviews.

Another difficulty is the time pressure. The parents in this research lived in two different cities. I had to plan the interview schedule carefully and have some flexibility, because sometimes parents forgot or confused the time of the appointments. In addition, it was a longitudinal study; thus, to have good relationships with participants was very important. It was necessary to maintain a tone of “friendly” chat (Fontana and Frey, 1994) and spend some time talking about other topics in which the parents may be interested to build up the relationship between the parents and me. Although there was pressure on time during the interviews, all interviews were enjoyable experiences conducted with a sense of trust and friendship.

### **3.6 Analysis of the interview data**

Qualitative data analysis using an inductive approach begins with the rough definition of research question, data collection, coding, saturating categories and exploring relationships between categories (Bryman, 2004). This can be contained in three sub-processes: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Huberman and Miles, 1998). After collection, the data has to be reduced to its component parts in order to make complicated things understandable (Bernard 1988 cited in Huberman and Miles, 1998). In this stage, data are coded and summarized into themes

(Wellington, 2000). Data display allows the researcher to conceptualize the material as organized and assembled data. The third process is conclusion drawing which involves interpreting and giving meaning to data (Wellington, 2000). These processes provided a useful starting point for data analysis in this research but Wellington (2000) argues that analysing qualitative data is messier and more complicated than these three processes would suggest. He suggests that data analysis has to involve immersion in the data, reflecting on it, taking it apart, synthesizing it, relating and locating the data, and presenting the data. These strategies will be used in data analysis of this research.

All the interviews were recorded by MP3 recorder and transcribed in detail in Chinese. In order to manage such a large amount of qualitative data, every transcription from two phases of interviews was printed. Each transcription was read and re-read carefully to understand a sense of the holism of the interview before finding the appropriate codes from the data. Identifying appropriate codes and categorizing the data into themes were important steps in the data analysis. Kerlinger (1970) defines coding as 'the translation of question responses and respondent information to specific categories for the purpose of analysis' (Cited in Cohen et al., 2000: 283). After coding, the researcher has to examine and compare the data within the categories and compare the data across categories in order to build an integrated explanation (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). The transcription was written in Chinese but coded in English. The Chinese transcriptions helped me to understand the parents' real feeling. Sometimes, parents did not need to speak the words. I could understand what they meant because we use the same language and share the same culture. The processes of analysis were:

- Transcribing interviews
- Reading transcription
- Analyzing data and finding codes
- Categorizing and translating data
- Determining themes
- Examining and comparing the data
- Building a logical chain of findings

### **3.6.1 Data management and Analysis**

#### Coding and categorizing the first phases of interviews

The parents' responses were broken down to identify the key phrases from each answer and these phrases were grouped to form the codes. Thus the codes emerged from the analysis as shown for example, Table 3.5.

Table 3.5 An example of coding interviews

Interview question	Parent's respond	Key phases	Code
Why did you send your child to a preschool?	<i>Sending her to a school in order to let her have opportunities to meet other people and children; therefore, she won't be afraid of unfamiliar people. She doesn't even know how to play with a new friend. She only wants to play with the child whom she is very familiar with. Some children can easily play and <b><u>work with the others</u></b>, but she cannot. She always plays alone (<b>Ling</b>)</i>	Work with others	Personal social development
	<i>My mother broke her arm and her health is not well. <b><u>She cannot look after my daughter</u></b> now so my mother in law is looking after her. However, my mother in law cannot look after her every day, only Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. The other days, I have to send my daughter to my parents' house and my father looks after her. It is not convenient for me and my parents so I want to send her to a school (<b>Ping</b>).</i>	No one can look after my child	Child care
	<i>My son watched TV for whole day at home when he stayed with his grandparents. They <b><u>cannot sit alongside him to do some reading or teach him something</u></b> (<b>Hsieh</b>)</i>	Reading Teaching something	Education

The first main question was “Why do you send your child to a preschool?” An individual parent may have more than one reason. Twelve phrases from this question

divided into three groups; personal social development, child care and Education.

- Personal social development:

To have a collective life

To meet other children

To play with other children

To enhance interpersonal relationships

To know how to share with others

To become independent and confident

- Child care:

Nobody looking after him/her

- Education:

Learning something

Having different experience and resources

Nobody teaching him / her reading

Only watching TV at home

Feeling bored at home and no progress

The second question was “What do you think your child needs to learn in a preschool?” The responses involved thirteen phrases which were divided into two groups; social personal development and academic skills:

- Social personal development:

To learn to cooperate with other children

To learn to share interests with others

To learn to protect oneself

To develop self-confidence

To learn good manners

To learn good behaviour (polite or well manner)

To learn good living habits (eating habits, personal hygiene habits or following the timetable for sleeping)

To learn a collective life (work and play with others)

To learn to interact with peers

● Academic skills:

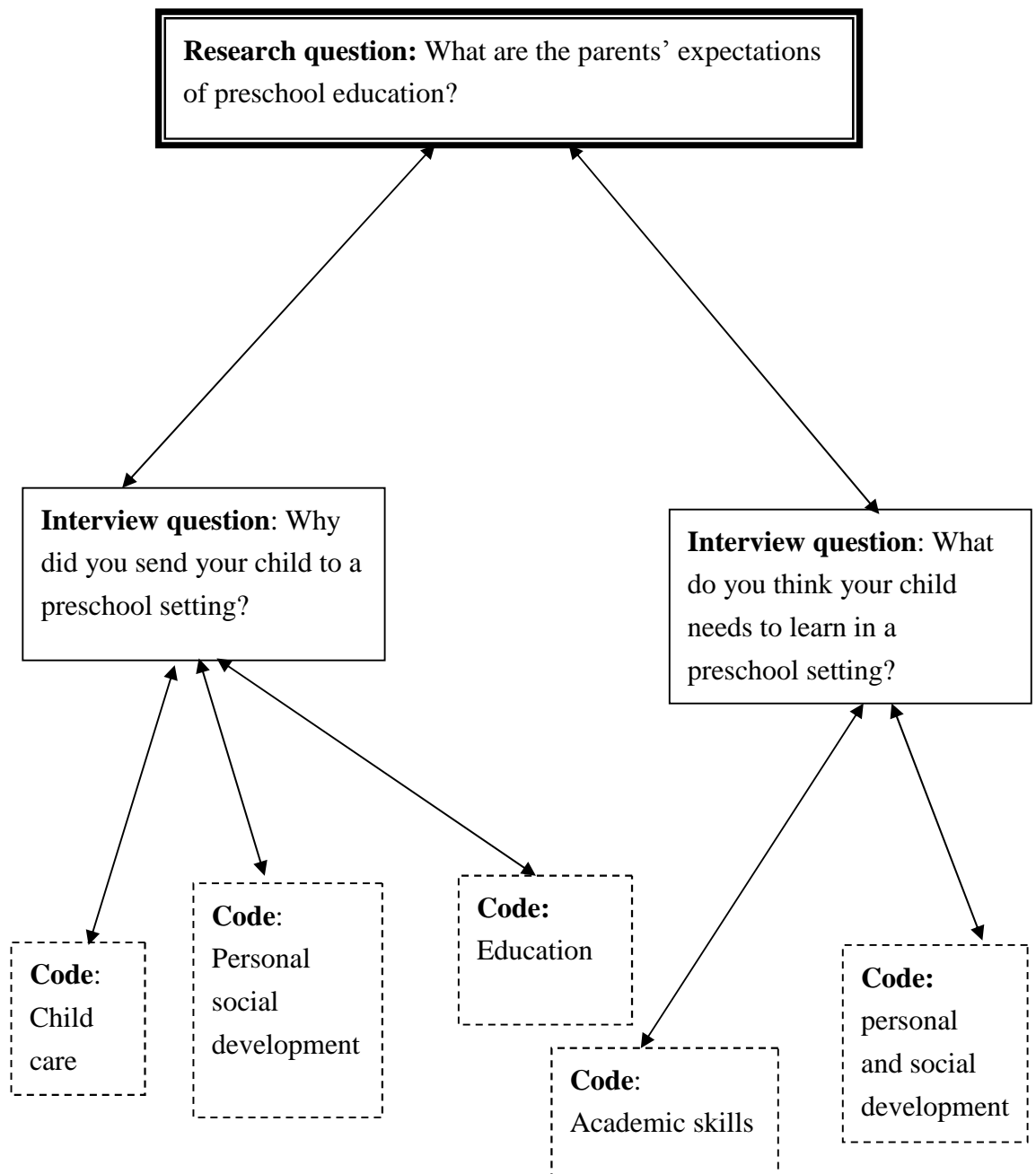
To learn reading, writing and calculating

To learn English and Mathematics

To learn Chinese phonetic symbols

To prepare for the primary curriculum

The parents' aims for sending their child to a preschool can be defined as socializing, caring and educating. In addition, their expectation of preschool education is to prepare the children for primary school, including the development of their social and academic skills (see Figure 3.3).



**Figure 3.3: An example of the process of analysis**

The second research question is “what are parents’ criteria for choosing a preschool?”. To answer this question two others were asked “when you chose a preschool what were your concerns for a good preschool?” and “why did you choose the particular preschool for your child?” Following a similar analytical process the participants’ preferences for preschools were found to be diverse and complicated and reflected their specific concerns. Wikeley (1998) also found that individual parents had a complex mixture of reasons for choice. The phrases from the parents’ answers and the codes were:

- Distance

Near my house

Near my parents’ house

No need to take a school bus

- Physical environment

Teacher-child ratios

Clean environment

Adequate and nice facilities

Environmental safety

Ample space

- Teachers

Qualified in early childhood care and education

Qualified in nursery nursing

Completed training course

Prefer young teachers



Experienced teachers

Teacher's characters (lively, sensitive or kind)

Discipline skills

- Curriculum

Chinese phonetic symbols

Literacy and numeracy

Strict plan for curriculum and using textbooks

English language teaching

Teaching by foreign teachers

Similar to primary school's curriculum

Diverse area for curriculum

- School meals

Providing breakfast

Adequate nutrition

In answer to the question “why did you choose the particular preschool for your child?”, eight different codes were used which were distance and convenience, natural and ample space, good teacher-child ratios, having foreign teachers, familiar with the schools, school reputation, the head-teacher's values and good teacher-child interaction. In addition, probing the relationships between parents' criteria for a good preschool and their choice was important in the analysis, and will be discussed in Chapter Five.

The third research question was “what are the influences on the choice process?”

Parents were asked “How did you get the information about those preschools you were visiting or considering choosing?” and “Can you talk about preschool policies such as the educational voucher scheme, registered regulation for preschools and national evaluation of preschools, and the influences of these policies on your choices”. The responses to the question about getting information on preschools were grouped into external or internal social networks. The responses that included the words ‘neighbours’, ‘colleagues’ or ‘friends’ were grouped together in the external category. On the other hand, the responses with the words ‘parents’ or ‘parents-in-law’, ‘sisters’ or ‘sister-in-law’ or ‘husband’ were categorized in “family” group. In addition, preschool policies involved three categories, the early childhood educational voucher scheme, national evaluation of preschools and preschool registration. These were used to investigate the participants’ knowledge about the preschool policies and the influences on their choice.

#### Coding and categorizing the second phase of interviews

The second phase of interviews was conducted after nine months to explore the participants’ satisfaction with their choice in order to elucidate the changes in their criteria of quality for a preschool. This was to explore the fourth research question “Are they satisfied with their choice and have their expectations been met?” The interview questions included children’s experience in the schools, children’s changes, parents’ opinions about the preschool provision, their thoughts about moving their children to other preschools and their advice to others about choosing preschools.

The strategies used in analyzing the second phase of interviews were similar to the first phase of interviews. The data were analyzed and the appropriate codes were

identified for each answer. However, this was not as easy as in the first interviews as the relationships between the two interviews had to be considered. For children's experience in the preschool, the answers from parents were coded as: happy, getting used to the school life, recently not happy. When talking about the changes in their children the codes were;

- Social development

Cooperating with other peers

Better interaction with others

Better relationship with other children

Talking and playing with peers

Nice interaction with peers

Not afraid of strangers

Improving interpersonal relationships

Polite

Independent

Lively and gregarious

Getting used to collective life

- Physical and functional independence

Good habits in sleeping, eating and brushing teeth regularly

Washing dishes and brushing teeth

Sleeping regularly

Tiding up toys

Eating properly

Wiping the table

Better in taking medicines

Naughty

Responding to parents loudly

Not obeying parents' orders

- Self-expression skills

Speaking clearly

Improving expression

Knowing how to express feelings

- Academic skills

Knowing many words

Able to read books

Singing English songs and speaking English

Recognizing English letters

Recognizing some Chinese vocabulary

The third main interview question was “Can you tell me about the physical environment / teachers / curricula in the preschool?” When parents talked about the physical environment, teachers or curricula of the preschool, they expressed their opinions about what the school had offered. I broke down answers to into “satisfaction” and “dissatisfaction” categories.

- Satisfaction with the physical environment

Big classroom

Clean environment

Big space

New and safe facilities

Big outdoor playground

Facilities designed for children

One toilet between two classrooms

Good facilities and library

Many trees

Big and natural environment

● Dissatisfaction with the physical environment

Small space

No outdoor playground

Old and inadequate facilities

No window and using central air conditioner

Inadequate opportunities for facility use

● Satisfaction with teachers

Good patience and manner

My child likes her

Good discipline skills

Friendly and kind

Cheerful

Lively

My daughter trusts her

Good communicating skills

Caring

- Dissatisfaction with teachers

Poor communicating skills

Children had poor English performance

Lack patience

Inappropriate disciplining strategy

- Satisfaction with curriculum

Diversity

Appropriate activities

Doing lots of arts and crafts

Children enjoyed activities

Well designed activities

- Dissatisfaction with curriculum

Not following the timetable

Asking children to recite “Syiau Jieng<sup>19</sup>”

Inadequate Chinese literacy lessons

Teaching approach was not suitable for the child

However, as well as the physical environment, teachers and curriculum, parents also talked about their dissatisfaction with school meals, timing issues and teacher-child ratios. Parents’ satisfaction with the school provision reflected their criteria for choice. Some parents’ dissatisfaction correlated with whether they considered changing preschool.

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<sup>19</sup> Includes eighteen articles written in classical literary Chinese.

The last main interview question was about their advice to others when choosing preschools. These were coded as testing the water, visiting schools and asking for advice:

- Testing the water

Let children adapt themselves to schools

Sending children to the school directly

Children need to try a school out

- Visiting preschools

Comparing the differences between schools

Observing children using facilities

Talking to head-teachers

Visiting schools to observe teacher-child interaction

Visiting schools to observe teachers' teaching

Observing the environment

Observing teachers' attitudes

- Asking for advice

Discussing information about schools with relatives

Collecting information from colleagues

Asking friends about their experiences

However, the relationships between children's experiences in preschools, parents' criteria for choosing preschools, parents' expectations of preschool education and

their satisfaction with their choices had to be identified in order to understand individual parents' satisfaction with their choices and build up a logical chain for individual cases. By comparing the data (Rubin and Rubin, 1995), common and contrasting themes were generated, which allowed a deeper understanding of the parental choices for preschools to be achieved..

### **3.6.2 The difficulties of analyzing interview data**

#### Translating the data

The first difficulty in analyzing interview data is the translation. All the data were collected and analyzed in Chinese. Using Chinese to analyze the data would make it easier for me to explore the hidden meaning of the parents' answers and could have created a better and deeper understanding of the data. However, when presenting the findings in English, it became difficult to translate the data without losing some of the meaning or making misleading statements. Sometimes, it is surprisingly complex to find an appropriate English word to describe the exact meaning of a Chinese statement. To help solve this problem, the analysis was discussed with native English speakers in order to clarify the full meaning.

#### The difficulty of categorizing data and the risks of fragmenting data

It was not difficult to allocate codes and categorize the data when analyzing the findings from the first interviews. The assumption being that categorization of the data could be achieved based on theoretical points from the literature. For example, parents' criteria for choosing a school could be related to the definition of quality of a



preschool. The codes for parents' expectations of preschools could refer to the literature about the aims of preschool education. This was true for the first phase interviews but the data for the second phase interviews were about the influences on parents' satisfaction with their choices. They were complex and diverse. It was difficult to categorize the findings into appropriate groups. Therefore, the answers from all the interview questions had to be listed in order to determine the relationships between each question. For example, whether parents' experiences of preschools led them to consider a change of school, or were there other reasons? In addition, presentation of the data had to be considered in order to create a balance between the whole picture from all the different cases and the specific issues from each case.

### **3.6.3 Presenting data**

Initially the data had been considered and presented by themes. However, when findings by theme were presented, the whole picture of the individual stories became lost. Cohen et al. (2000) point out that the great tension in qualitative data analysis is between maintaining a sense of the holism of the interview and the tendency for analysis to fragment the data. The relationship between the influences on an individual parent's values and their expectations of preschool education and the process of an individual choosing a preschool became obscure. Therefore, the presentation of the data was altered to illustrate it case by case.

When presenting individual cases, it became obvious that parents had different strategies for looking at preschools. Some parents had very clear aims for preschool education for their children and they knew what kind of preschools suited their

children's needs. They had clear standards and criteria for choosing preschools. Some parents had clear criteria for choosing preschools but their experience changed those criteria. On the other hand, some parents did not easily identify their criteria for choosing preschools but they talked about their process of choosing preschools and which preschool met their preferences. One group of parents did not feel confident in choosing preschools. They accepted other people's suggestion. However, when I asked about their criteria for a good preschool, they seemed to have their standards which were not necessarily similar to the preschool they chose. All cases were categorized into four groups, based on the degree of clarity of the criteria the parents used during the process of selecting a preschool. The aim was to provide evidence of individual context, values, culture and influences in each case in order to understand the causes and effects of parental choice in different cases and to understand the processes and individual parent's criteria for choosing preschools. The four groups are:

- The *Know what I want* parents These parents had clear criteria for selecting a preschool and they did not change these during the process of making a choice.
- The *Know what I want but changed my mind* parents These parents started with clear criteria for choosing a preschool. However, their experience and their children's experience led them to doubt their criteria.
- The *Don't know what I want but I will know it when I see it* parents These parents developed their criteria of a good preschool after they visited different preschools.
- The *Other people know better* parents These parents did not have a strong opinion about choosing a preschool. They were guided in their choice of preschool by other people's suggestions.

In addition, the analysis of crossing eighteen cases is presented in Chapter Five. This analysis helped to compare parents' viewpoints and synthesize common positions. The aim of this format is to provide a whole picture for this research. How Taiwanese cultural values were one of the criteria which influenced parental choice is also discussed. The themes were based on the research questions.

### **3.7 The ethical issues in this research**

The main instrument of this research was the interview. This involves interpersonal interaction and produces information about human action (Cohen et al, 2000). Three main areas of ethical issues: informed consent, confidentiality and protection from harm have to be considered in planning research (Cohen et al, 2000; Fontana and Frey, 1994). In order to avoid ethical harm in this research, three ethical questions from Cohen et al (2000: 292) "*Research Methods in Education*" were considered throughout the research process.

- Has the informed consent of the interviewees been gained?
- Have confidentiality, anonymity, non-identifiability and non-traceability been guaranteed
- What has been done to ensure that the interview is conducted in an appropriate, non-stressful, non-threatening, manner?

All participants in this research were introduced by friends and relatives, who were asked to forward a letter to potential participants requesting their permission to be contacted. Parents were not contacted before obtaining their permission. The

introductory letter described the occupation of the researcher, the purposes of the research; what the research questions would be and what the research schedule would be. After getting parents' agreement, email was used for the initial personal contact. In addition, parents' agreement was also sought to use an MP3 recorder to record all the interviews. The parents' feelings and sensitivities were considered during the interviews.

In agreement with good research practice, total confidentiality was maintained during the research and subsequently (Cohen et al., 2000). Anonymity was assured by creating a code name for each participant and these code names are used in the presentation of all data.

In order to ensure that the interview was conducted in appropriate, comfortable surroundings, the place and the time of interviews were chosen by parents. These included their homes, offices or coffee shops; at any time they found convenient.

### **3.8 Reliability and validity**

High quality research has to consider the criteria of reliability and validity (Bryman, 2004; Cohen et al., 2000). Anderson (cited in Wellington, 2000) proposes that double-barrelled questions, two-in-one questions, restrictive questions, leading questions and loaded questions have to be avoided in order to gain reliable information. Therefore, during data collection, the interviewer's opinions were avoided. Interview guides relating to parents' diaries and their previous statements of the interviews helped avoid any bias in the starting points of the parents' own explanations of their expectation of preschool education, their criteria of good

preschools and their satisfaction with their choices. In addition, Silverman (2001) mentions that the reliability of the transcripts may be weakened by a failure to transcribe apparent details. He suggests that reliable interview studies should use low-inference methods; tape-recording all face-to-face interviews; carefully transcribing these tapes in every detail and presenting long extracts of data in the research report. In adherence to these indications, every interview was recorded by MP3 recorder and transcribed in detail.

*“Validity in qualitative research was addressed through the honesty, depth, richness and scope of the extent of triangulation and the disinterestedness or objectivity of the researcher”* (Cohen et al, 2000: 105). Similarly, Silverman (2001) points out that the values of the researcher and the truth status of a respondent’s account have influence on the validity of the research. Under these conditions, Silverman suggests the use of triangulation by comparing different kinds of data or taking one’s findings back to the respondents being studied to improve the validity of the research. In this research, diaries and two phases of interviews were conducted to collect the data. The validity of the data would be found in the connection between the three data collection phases. In addition, the transcriptions of individual interviews were done soon after interviews were conducted and then sent to the individual parents to approve the contents of the interviews. Two parents, Jun and Hsu added some comments to their original responses. Other parents agreed with the transcriptions.

### **3.9 Reflection**

I have taught in a university early childhood education and care department for three years. I have met many preschool teachers, head-teachers and owners. As an educator

of preschool teachers, I know the tensions between their differing perspectives, especially relating to preschool teachers' practice. The aims of this research were to gain access to parents' views of the value of appropriate and good preschools, and the process of their decision making to raise concerns as to how parental choice may influence preschool provision in Taiwan. However, this is a small scale study and does not intend to represent the views of all Taiwanese parents, only to understand the issues and how these may be addressed.

I used purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2000) to identify my sample. 'In purposive sampling, researchers handpick the case to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality. In this way, they build up a sample that is satisfactory to their specific needs' (Cohen et al., 2000: 103). I found the parents through my social networks which included my relatives, friends and also students as it was not only important that the parents met the needs of the research (i.e. their eldest child was about to start preschool) but that they were also willing to participate. It is not common for Taiwanese to talk openly with the people whom they do not know. Although the parents were only from Taipei and Miaoli, these two cities have different cultures and people have different life styles. The parents had different educational backgrounds and occupations which included non-working mothers. Therefore there is no reason to believe that they are not typical of Taiwanese parents as a whole. However, it has to be acknowledged that this particular group of parents could have specific characteristics. For example, the parents may have been willing to be part of this research, because they were particularly confident of their criteria of choosing preschools and in making their choices. They might operate more actively in a preschool market and have a better understanding of what they want for their children than other parents. However, their willingness to participate was the key to

the research and the findings need to be considered in this light.

Before commencing this research, I assumed that my role in this relationship was as their friend. I wanted to avoid dominating the conversation (Cohen et al., 2000). When we talked, we were sharing our experience rather than conducting an interview. My age, gender and married status were beneficial in this relation although I did not have a child. My age was similar to that of most of the parents; this helped us to talk to each other quite easily. In addition, as a married woman, I could establish good relationships with the parents. This advantage is referred to by Chawla-Duggan (2002). The processes of interviews were more like conversations sharing life and experience rather than answering questions. We shared our experience of being a “daughter-in-law”. They were also curious about my experience of studying in the UK and how I can study abroad alone. I was pleased to share my experience with them. All the processes of doing this research were joyful although I had one parent who appeared unwilling to share her opinions and experience with me. This parent was exceptionally busy and worked long hours. Although she had agreed to be part of the study it may be that she felt she had little time to spare. In most interviews, I gained useful information for my study. After collecting data, some parents still contacted me and told me about their children’s life in preschool. There was clear evidence of trust and rapport in the relationships between me and the parents. However, I had to consider that my professional experience as an early childhood educator might influence how the parents responded. Their perception of me as a professional may have made them want to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear rather than their true views. Hitchcock and Hughes (1989 cited in Cohen et al., 2000) argue that interviews are interpersonal, humans interacting with human so the researcher will always have some influence on the interviewee. On the other hand, my

working experience was helpful in terms of finding parents and gaining their trust. They were delighted to share their experience and concerns with me, particularly, their worries about their children's education, as my knowledge could give them useful information. One of the parents was a father. At the beginning, I worried that it may be difficult to gain his trust in talking to me. In this case, my professional experience particularly benefited our relationship. He was pleased to share his expectations of preschool education and tell me how much attention he paid to his son's education. Also he was glad to learn about my perspectives on preschool education.

My experience and knowledge was helpful in understanding the problems of preschool provision in Taiwan and this helped in being able to probe the parents' answers but it might also have influenced my interpretation of the findings (Cohen et al., 2000). Whilst acknowledging this influence, I undertook a process of respondent validation (see the above section) and during the analysis stage I kept asking myself questions as to how confident I was in the validity of my judgements.

### **3.10 Summary**

This chapter has discussed how the research was accomplished and what concerns were raised during the research process. A qualitative method has been adopted by using a case study approach. Eighteen parents participated in this research and have been followed up for one year. Diaries and two phases of interviews were conducted for collecting data. This chapter has addressed: the methodology of this research, the research plan, participants, the development of research instruments, the processes and difficulties of data collection, the strategies of data analysis, the ethical issues,



reliability and validity of this research. The next chapter will present individual parents' stories in detail.

## Chapter Four: Parents' Stories

### **4.0 Introduction**

This chapter presents twelve parents' stories describing the process by which they chose a preschool for their children. The twelve stories presented have been chosen from eighteen parents as the ones that most clearly identify the four different categories. The other six parents' stories provided further evidence for the choice of the categories but not so clearly and are not included here although their data was used in the cross-case analysis (see Chapter Five). The research found that the parents fell into four categories, to a greater or lesser extent. As explained in Chapter Three, some parents had clear expectations of preschool education and were looking for a preschool that met these. These were the '*Know what I want*' parents. Others made their original choice on one set of criteria but over time these criteria changed. These are the '*Know what I want but changed my mind*' parents. The other two groups were the '*Don't know what I want but I will know it when I see it*' parents and the '*Other people know better*' parents. However, for all these parents the process was not simple and the aim of this chapter is to explore the differences and highlight the complexities of individual cases.

### **4.1 The "Know what I want" parents**

The following section presents five different stories. These parents differed in their concerns when choosing a preschool but all of them had a clear idea about what was good for their children and what their children needed. They had clear priorities when choosing a preschool and knew what they wanted for their children. Ye chose a

preschool because of its convenience. May was worried about her daughter's motor development and chose a preschool with big outdoor space. Hui was concerned about her daughter's English language development and was looking for a bilingual preschool. Shieh and Hsu knew what was important for their children. They considered the benefits and costs and chose a preschool which they believed was good for their children.

#### **4.1.1 Parent Ye**

Ye and her husband work in the same company in sales. They both have two-year college certificates. Their family income is approximately three million Taiwanese dollars (fifty thousands pounds) per year. They live with Ye's parents-in-law and brother-in-law and have one four-year-old son. Her mother-in-law teaches in a junior high school but her father-in-law has retired from teaching. Ye and her husband work very long hours, often until nine or ten o'clock at night. Before her son began preschool he was looked after by his grandfather.

##### Why preschool?

Ye was concerned that as her son was the only child in the family, he did not have opportunities to meet and play with other children. Sending him to a preschool would address this and teach him how to cooperate with peers. Ye did not expect her son to learn academic subjects from a preschool. His grandfather, a retired teacher, could teach reading, arts and cognitive knowledge. She only wanted him to learn how to get along with other children, interact with others and learn how to protect himself. She felt a preschool would naturally provide opportunities for working and playing with

other children.

### Criteria for choosing a preschool

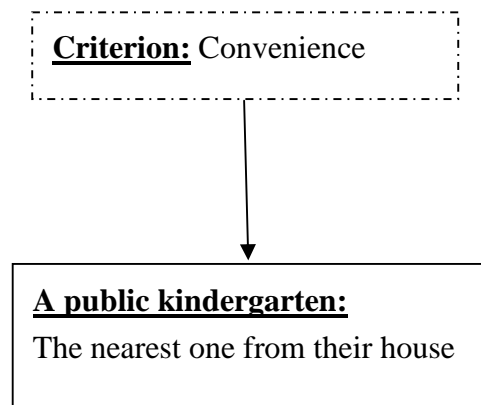
When I gave the diary to Ye in April 2005, she told me that she would probably send her son to the public kindergarten opposite their house because it was close to her home. It was convenient for her. She had no plans to visit any other preschool.

Ye did not change her mind and by the time of the first interview, her son had been attending this public kindergarten for three weeks. She said that if there had been another one closer to their home, she might have sent him there. Distance was the most important criterion in her choice. She did not want her son to take a school bus because of perceived dangers. She visited once before he started but did not spend much time talking to the head-teacher or other staff. She was happy with the environment and the quality of teachers. She said:

*... the classroom, facilities and toilets were clean and I think the teachers in public kindergarten must be qualified. If you choose a private school, you cannot ask teachers to show you their qualifications. It was strange for me ... the teachers looked nice although I did not speak to them.*

However, she noted two concerns about the kindergarten in her diaries. One was the high child-teacher ratio of 30:2 in each classroom. Another was that this public kindergarten did not provide English language lessons for the children. When asked whether these concerns influenced her decision, she said that “*it was fine without English lessons in this school because I can send my son to a private cram school for English language learning*”. She chose this preschool not because it was a public

kindergarten but because it was convenient (see Figure 4.1).



**Figure: 4.1 Ye's decision making process**

#### Influences on her choice

Although Ye lived with her parents-in-law, and her father-in-law took most of the responsibility for her son's learning and care, they did not try to influence her choice of preschool. Ye worked long hours and could not collect her son from the preschool. She commented that her son talked about the school day to his grandfather on the way home. She also mentioned that she had enrolled her son in English language and dancing lessons at cram schools, but by the time of the second interviews she had withdrawn him because his grandfather taught him lots of things such as arts and crafts and she believed this was enough.

Ye did not use her social networks to gain information about preschools because she had already decided to choose the closest one for her son. When asked about the early childhood educational voucher scheme, she knew that children studying in private preschools could apply for them. She did not know of the national evaluation of

preschools.

### Satisfaction

By the time of the second interview, Ye's son had been in the kindergarten for nine months. However, Ye did not feel that he had made any progress. For example, he already knew many Chinese words before he attended the kindergarten. Anything the school had taught him was easier than the works his grandfather had taught him. In the first interview, she had expected preschool experience to improve her son's social skills. In the second interview she commented that she had not noticed much change in him but Ye was busy and did not have many opportunities to observe him with other children. However, she still believed he needed to attend preschool because it was time for him to interact with other children.

Although Ye had not seen any changes in her son, when asked whether she was satisfied, she said she was happy with the preschool. She mentioned that this kindergarten used a 'Theme' approach such as visiting a supermarket or police station, and having different activities relating to national festivals; thus she felt it was good. When asked about the teachers, she said she had not been able to make a judgment because she seldom met or spoke to them. Her father-in-law picked her son up everyday because she was busy at work. She now thought the child-teacher ratio was fine because he did not face any risk in the preschool. She felt she could tell the quality of the kindergarten, including the quality of the teachers, from her son's attitude. He had never refused to go to the preschool so she believed it was a good situation. Her son would stay there until he went to primary school.

## Summary

Ye chose a public kindergarten purely because of its convenience; she believed that choosing a preschool close to home was very important. She did not have time to see the school for herself but she did not worry about its quality. The fact that her son enjoyed preschool life was enough. Ye thought that this was more important than what he had learned or what facilities the preschool provided. One reason for her lack of worry about what the preschool offered could have been that her father-in-law gave lots of help educating him.

#### **4.1.2 Parent May**

May is a secondary school teacher and has a Bachelor's degree. Her husband is an engineer in a high technology company and has a Master's degree. They live as a nuclear family and have one daughter. The family income is about two million Taiwanese dollars per year (about thirty-three thousand pounds). Before her daughter went to a preschool, she was looked after by a child minder.

##### Why preschool?

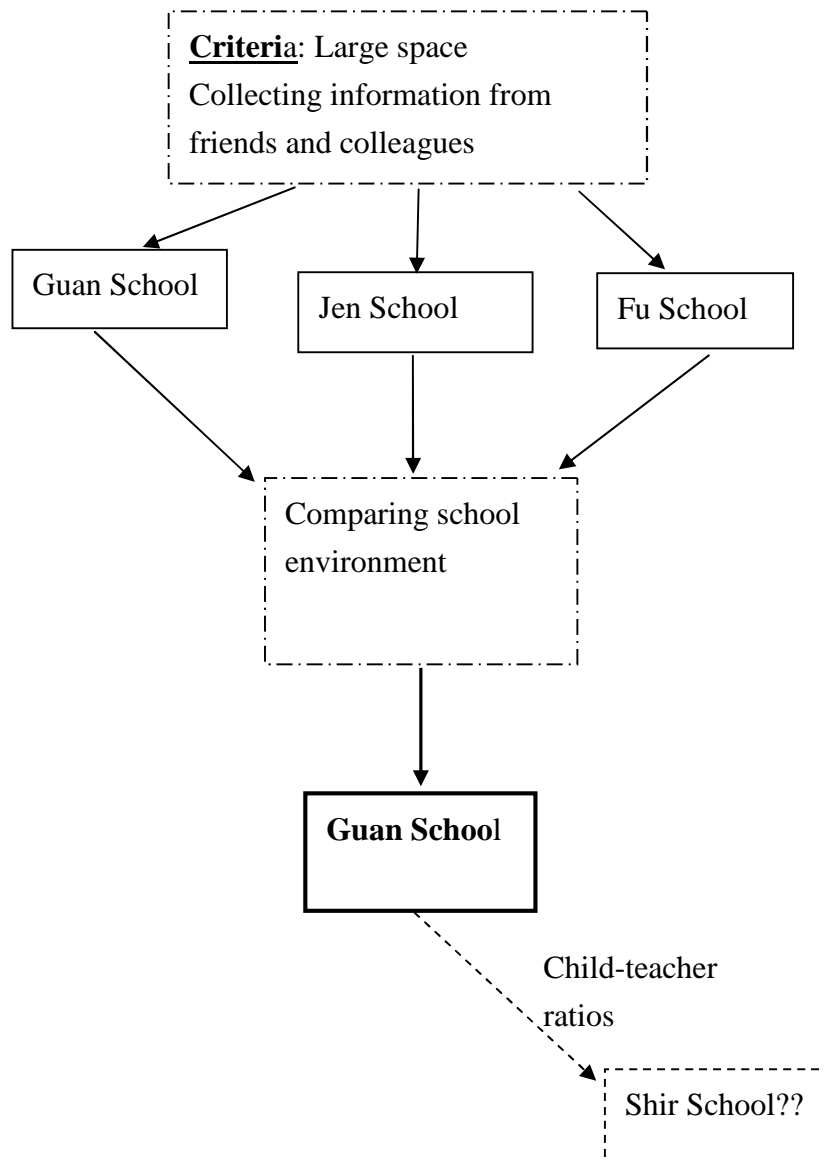
May's daughter did not have many opportunities to play with other children at the child minder's house. May believed that her daughter should get used to being with other children and also become independent before attending primary school. Both her house and the child-minder's, were small and could not provide a large place for her to develop motor skills. Therefore, a priority for May was that a preschool had to have a big outdoor playground in order to help her daughter's physical development.

##### Criteria for choosing a preschool

May asked her friends and colleagues about various preschools and had been gathering information since her daughter was born. Some preschools had a good reputation and therefore she already had her preferences. In her diary she listed her preferred preschools as: first, Guan School, second, Jen School and third, Fu School. These three preschools all have spacious playgrounds. Guan School also has many trees and some animals. She felt such an environment was important for children. She would not consider a preschool which had only indoor play space, even if all the other



facilities were excellent (see Figure 4.2).



**Figure 4.2: May's decision making process**

May mentioned that she wished her daughter to learn social skills, self management and good manners but was not concerned about what cognitive knowledge was taught because she could teach her daughter at home. On the other hand, she did not have

many opportunities to take her on outdoor activities. Therefore, May believed that her daughter would be happiest at a preschool with a large outdoor play area. By the time of the first interview, her daughter had attended Guan School for two weeks. May felt that good teachers affected the quality of children's experience in the preschool. She also wanted her daughter to enjoy her preschool life. Her preference was for a sensitive and cheerful teacher and she was pleased with her daughters' teachers. When asked about what a good preschool should have, May said that before her daughter started preschool she would have said that a secure and large space was most important but now that her daughter was at preschool, a sensitive and cheerful teacher had become a more important criterion.

#### Influences on her choice

May did not pay much attention to preschool policies when choosing a preschool. She knew Guan School had been registered but did not know whether it was registered as a kindergarten or a nursery. She had heard about a national evaluation of preschools but did not know what these standards were although she knew some preschools near her house had an "excellent" score. However these preschools did not have any outdoor space for play so she did not consider them. She said:

*"I heard about it but I didn't know the details of the evaluation. Some schools near my house got "excellent" for the evaluation; although they had a nice indoor space there was no outdoor play ground. I chose Guan School because it has a big outdoor space. But I didn't know its result in the national evaluation."*

May had heard about the early childhood educational voucher scheme but she was surprised that they were only for five-year-olds. May had clear criteria and goals for

her daughter's preschool education. Consequently, when she gathered information from her friends and colleagues, she could identify her preferences when making her decision.

### Satisfaction

Her daughter had nine months preschool experience by the time of the second interview. May was pleased with her daughter's development in various skills especially social interaction. In addition, her daughter's cognitive knowledge had improved although she did not expect this. May said that she had deeper understanding of her daughter because she had been able to observe the interaction between her daughter and her peers. Both May and her daughter liked the environment of Guan School. They felt that when they went into the school; *"It seemed like we were going into a forest."*

May had not paid close attention to the curricula on offer when considering a preschool. *"I was only concerned about a secure and large space. If she is happy in the school, I am ok about the curricula on offer. My daughter is happy there."* However, she knew that Guan School used a "Theme Approach". Different themes were used each month for designing their curricula. The curricula involved many activities. May was delighted with the curricula and so was her daughter.

Generally, May was satisfied with her choice of preschool. Her daughter had a good relationship with both teachers. They were patient and sunny but not as sensitive as she had been expecting. They paid attention to the general situation but not to every detail but she could accept that. Her only worry was the 30:2 (child-teacher) ratios in

the classroom. She thought it was too high and not appropriate for three-year-old children. She thought about moving her daughter to Shir School. It had the same advantages as Guan School, such as a big outdoor playground and good reputation. It also had two teachers looking after thirty children but Shir School additionally had two student teachers in each class and therefore a 30: 4 ratio. May believed that the lower child-teacher ratio would enable her daughter to have more attention from the teachers in a class. However, in Shir School, parents had to pick up their children at half past four every day which was not possible for May. She was generally happy with Guan School; therefore, she had thought about moving but decided not to.

May's experience led her to suggest that when choosing a preschool, parents should refer to other people's experience. Parents should spend time visiting schools and talking to the parents whose children were there, to gain a deeper understanding of the quality. She said that she had done this when making her choice and had no regrets.

### Summary

May believed that referring to other parents' experience was important to gain appropriate information. Therefore, she talked to her friends or colleagues to gain information about the preschools before visiting. May knew about her daughter's needs and had clear expectations of preschool education. She used these expectations to select a preschool for her daughter.

### **4.1.3 Parent Hui**

Hui and her husband are IT personnel in the same bank and have Bachelor's degrees. They lived as a nuclear family and only have one daughter. Their family income is about two million five hundred thousand Taiwanese dollars (about forty-one thousand pounds) per year.

#### Why preschools?

Hui's mother used to look after her daughter. However she was now not well and could not do this for a whole day. In addition, Hui felt that her daughter did not have enough opportunities to meet other children. If she attended a preschool, she could learn how to cooperate with other children. For these reasons, she wanted to send her daughter to a preschool.

#### Criteria for choosing a preschool

Although Hui decided to send her daughter to a preschool, she still needed her mother to pick up her daughter from preschool because she had to work. Consequently, she would only consider a preschool close to her parents' house. She said that it was also important that her daughter learned English. A fortune-teller had once told her that her daughter had a talent for languages so she wanted to provide an environment of English language learning for her daughter. An English-speaking preschool would be her ideal choice. Hui works in a big company. She believed that a large preschool would be in a better position to provide the quality of education she wanted for her daughter. Hence, she did not consider small preschools. Hui seemed to have clear

criteria for choosing a preschool, although she visited three preschools before making her decision.

Hui visited Fish School because it had gained an “excellent” score in the national evaluation and she wanted to know what a good preschool was. From her observations, Fish School had a hygienic environment and a clean kitchen. The school meals were good and nutritious. However, mosquito coil incense was used which Hui’s mother could not accept. In addition, it was a long way from her parents’ house. Fish School was therefore rejected.

Sing School was more than thirty years old. It had lots of space and Hui felt the head-teacher was nice. She had phoned Sing School before she visited it and the head-teacher had told her about the curricula and the school facilities. Hui liked the idea of Sing School because it had sand and water for children’s play and the curricula were various and diverse. However, when she visited she found the school buildings to be old and dark. There were flies and mosquitoes on the grass in the campus. The toilets had a bad smell. Although it had a lot of space and diverse curricula, she rejected it.

Hui chose Ho School because it was close to her parent’s house and her mother could walk to it to collect her daughter. Ho school<sup>20</sup> was a chain preschool which made Hui thinking that it would have stable standards. For instance, teachers had contracts preventing them from leaving the preschool during term time; therefore, there was no risk to the children of a fragmented education. Ho School was in a big building. It had

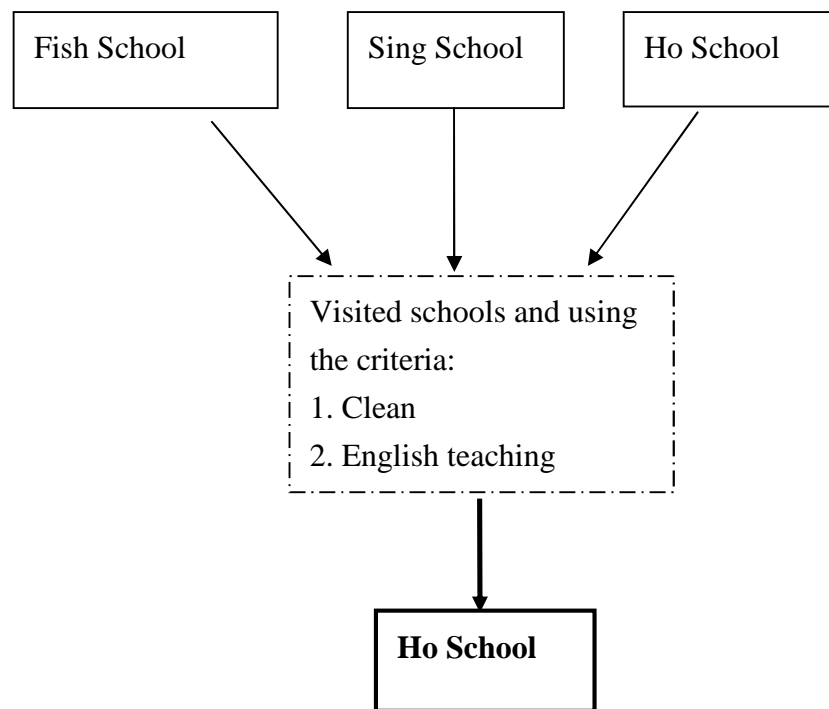
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<sup>20</sup> Ho School belongs to an educational organization which has a press, book stores, preschool settings and English language cram schools in many cities in Taiwan and also in China.

indoor space and modern facilities but did not have an outdoor playground. However, Hui's parents visited Ho School with her and they were all attracted by the modern and bright learning environment. Her parents suggested Hui should choose it.

Hui mentioned that she trusted a big company and therefore had not asked for details about what the preschool offered but only how they applied a whole English language approach. She believed that in a whole English language teaching class which had a foreign teacher for the whole day, children would make more progress in English. In addition, according to Hui's diary, Ho School also provided classes using a bilingual approach. This was a further reason for choosing Ho School. She said that if her daughter could not get used to a 'whole English language' class, she could move to a 'bilingual' class. Even though the curricula in Ho School only focused on English language learning and it did not have outdoor space for play, she still chose it for her daughter (see Figure 4.3).

By the time of the first interview, she had enrolled her daughter in Ho School but in a 'bilingual' class because, by then Hui had read many articles about the disadvantages of using a 'whole English language' approach. One main disadvantage was that children had to speak English in the class to communicate with teachers and peers. She was worried that this might restrict her daughter in expressing her feelings.



**Figure 4.3: Hui's decision making process**

#### Influences on her choice

Hui's mother played an important role in the decision-making process. For example, she mentioned that her mother did not like Fish School because it used mosquito coil incense. When she visited Ho School, her parents went with her. They were attracted by the modern facilities and told her to choose this preschool. In addition, Hui mentioned that she thought about another preschool which was close to her parents' house and had an "excellent" score in the national evaluation but it had mix-aged classes which her mother could not accept it. Although Hui thought it might help children learn by cooperating with children of other ages, she did not visit it or consider it because of her mother's preferences.



Although Hui and her family live far from her parents, they only considered preschools close to her parents' house. They live and work in the north of Taipei and her parents live in the south of Taipei. It would be necessary to spend lots of time in peak traffic to get their daughter to and from the preschool. However, her mother was the only person whom she trusted to look after her daughter, but as her health was not good enough to look after her daughter for whole day, she preferred a preschool close to her parents' house.

Hui appeared to have limited knowledge about preschool policies. Although she chose Fish School which had gained an "excellent" score in national evaluation of preschools, she did not understand why:

*"I could not understand why it gained the prize. It was quite small. Perhaps it was clean or it had good curricula. It was quite clean."*

When asked about the early childhood educational voucher scheme, she knew that the scheme was used for children studying in a preschool. But she did not know who could apply or how to apply for it. It did not affect her decision on choosing a preschool. When asked about whether Ho school was registered as a nursery or a kindergarten, Hui said

*"I think it is a nursery, although the staff told me that it is a kindergarten. But if it was a kindergarten, I think it would not be allowed to teach English..."*

This showed her lack of knowledge about the official registration of preschools and a limited awareness about the early childhood educational voucher scheme and national

evaluation of preschools.

### Satisfaction

By the time of the second interview, her daughter had been at Ho School for nine months. Her daughter had been happy to go to the preschool until recently. Hui could not understand the reason for the change. From her observation, she had presumed it was because her daughter always took a long time to finish her meals at preschool. Hui guessed that the teacher might have asked her to eat faster. However, whilst her daughter was refusing to go to preschool every morning, when asked after she came back from school, if she liked it, her response was *“Yes, I like to go to school”*. Therefore, Hui believed that on the whole her daughter enjoyed preschool.

Generally, Hui was satisfied with Ho School. Hui mentioned the preschool had many activities and she felt the teachers were conscientious but she did have some concerns.

Originally, she had been satisfied with the clean environment in Ho School. However, it only had indoor space and used air conditioners. This resulted in her daughter catching cold easily. Because of the frequency and seriousness of her daughter’s colds, Hui’s mother suggested she should move her daughter to another school which did not use air-conditioners. Hui thought about it but had not moved her daughter.

Her daughter had three teachers in her class, one foreign teacher, one Chinese teacher and one assistant teacher. Hui felt the Chinese teacher was patient and her daughter liked her. From her observation, the assistant teacher was in charge of disciplining children’s behaviour. She was strict and her daughter did not like her. Hui also

mentioned that the assistant teacher was young and her communication skills needed to be improved. She gave an example:

*“One day, my daughter told me that she was hit by a child in the school. I did not mind that my daughter was hit by the other child because it was normal when children played together. When I went to the school, the main teacher was not there and only the assistant teacher. I asked her about it. She told me that “I think it must be your daughter’s fault, because this other child is always good and well behaved”. I was not happy to hear that. The way she responded to me was always like that. Therefore, I avoided speaking to her but that did not mean she was a bad teacher.”*

She also worried that the foreign teacher’s pronunciation was not correct because he had strange accent. However, her daughter liked him and she was familiar with the teachers and her peers in the class. Therefore, Hui did not talk this issue to the head-teacher. When asked about the foreign teacher’s background, Hui did not know anything about this foreign teacher including where he came from and what his qualification was. Nor did she know the other two teachers’ backgrounds.

She did not pay attention to what curricula was offered to children because Ho School was a chain school with a good consistent standard of work. She said that she was not concerned about her daughter’s progress in English language as long as she was happy to go to school. On the other hand, she helped her daughter to practice English every day and corrected her pronunciation even though she knew that her daughter did not like her doing this. Hui seemed to pay a lot of attention to her daughter’s cognitive knowledge learning especially her English although she said that she was not concerned about what her daughter had been taught.

## Summary

Hui's mother had strong influence on Hui's choice. Hui visited preschools with her mother and took her mother's suggestion into account. Hui visited Fish School to determine the standards of good preschools. She preferred the curriculum in Sing School; however, the environment of Sing School was not clean. She chose Ho School because it belonged to a large preschool organization. Hui trusted large organizations. Therefore, she did not question too closely the quality of teachers or the curricula that the school offered. She was confident that the standards were high. She only considered changing to another preschool because of her daughter's health.

#### **4.1.4 Parent Shieh**

Shieh and her husband have Bachelor's degrees and they work in different banks. They and their two sons live with the husband's parents and sister. Before her son attended preschool, his grandparents looked after him. Shieh and her husband's joint income is about one million five hundred thousand Taiwanese dollars (about twenty-five thousand pounds) per year.

##### Why preschools?

Shieh felt that when her son stayed at home with his grandparents he only watched television and did not learn anything. She wished her son to learn self management, social manners and basic knowledge. Thus, she decided to send her son to preschool although her parents-in-law did not agree with her decision and would have liked to continue looking after him.

##### Criteria for choosing a preschool

Shieh looked for an established preschool which had large outdoor space with grass where children could run and play. There were such two preschools near their house; Shuang School and Chin Kindergarten. Chin Kindergarten was a public kindergarten and Shieh thought her parents-in-law might be happier with this because it was cheaper than a private kindergarten. However, it only accepted children who were four or five years old. By the time of the first interview Shieh's son was only three. From Shieh's perspective Shuang School, which had a good reputation and plenty of space, was better. Therefore, she sent her son to Shuang School (see Figure 4.4).

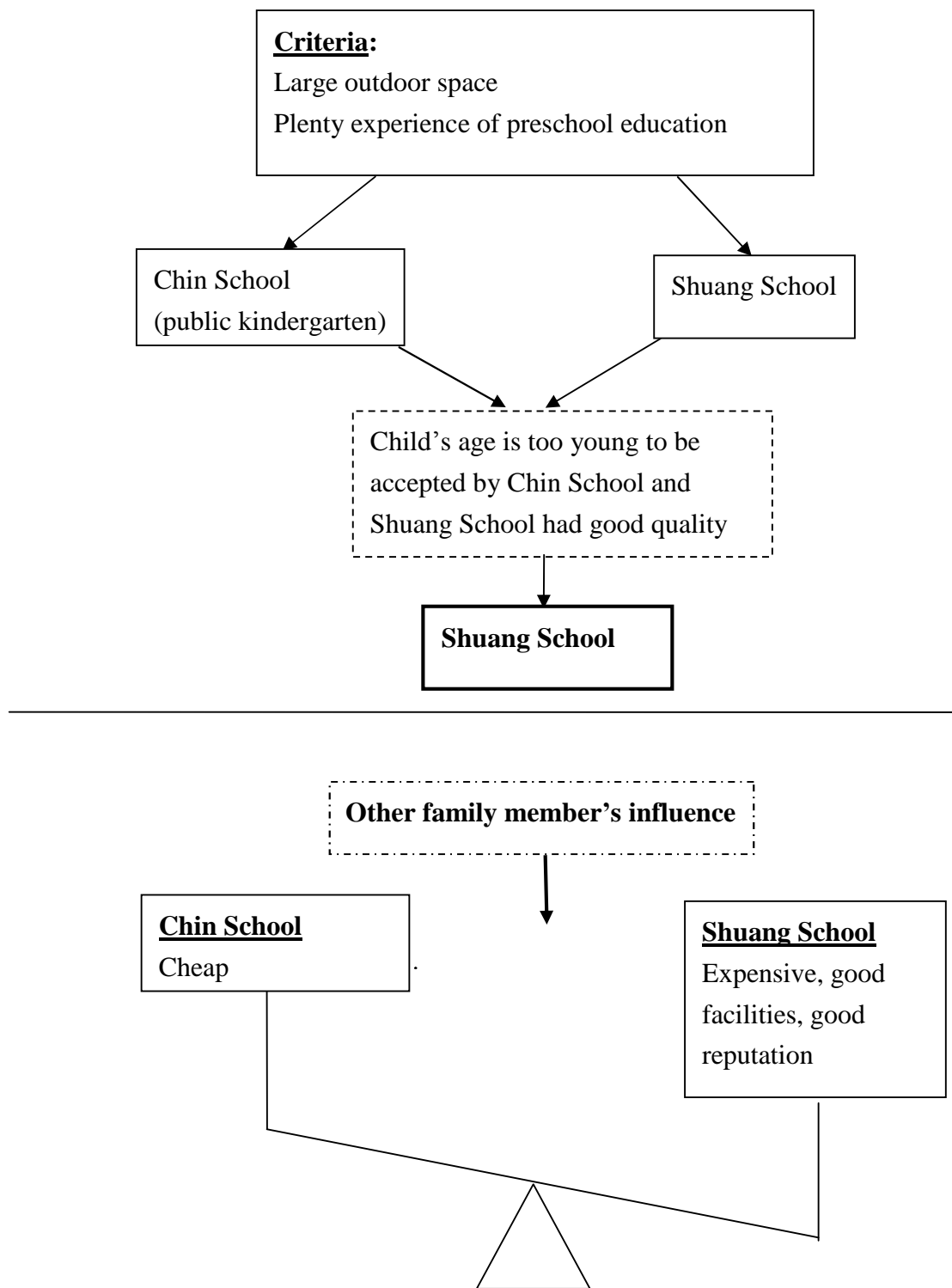


Figure 4.4: Shieh's decision making process

When Shieh visited Shuang School she liked the physical environment. Although it did not have beautiful or new buildings, there was plenty of space including sand and water play areas and gardens in which the children could grow flowers and vegetables. It also had a swimming pool. The wash basins and lavatories were designed for small children. Shieh said the School had a good reputation and the tuition fee was reasonable. By the time of the first interview, her son had attended Shuang School for three weeks and Shieh believed that she had made the right choice. She appreciated the main teacher's enthusiasm and the fact that she communicated with Shieh frequently<sup>21</sup>. The teacher was qualified, patient and sensitive about children's needs.

Shieh did not feel that she had a clear idea about what preschool curricula should offer to children but when she visited Shuang School, the staff explained the school timetable. Since her son has attended Shuang School, she has looked forward to seeing his work after he comes home. She has found the curriculum to be diverse and her son enjoys it.

Although Shieh had clear criteria for choosing a preschool, she still had uncertainty about her choice. The class she chose for her son had two lessons of English every week. Shieh believed this was enough for her son. On the other hand, she worried that other children in classes using bilingual or whole English language approaches might learn English more quickly. She mentioned this concern in the first interview and wondered if she should change her son to a bilingual class<sup>22</sup> when he is five years old. However, her husband did not agree with her.

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<sup>21</sup> There was an assistant teacher in the class but she did not communicate with the parents.

<sup>22</sup> Shuang School had classes using Chinese in teaching and some classes using a bilingual approach. The tuition fees were different. A bilingual class had a foreign teacher and a Taiwanese teacher.

### Influences on her choice

Shieh lived with her parents-in-law who had different values from her. They did not believe the quality of a preschool was as important as the preschool fees. They suggested a preschool which was cheap but had little space with many children. Shieh had to consider their feelings but she had her own views. She still insisted on choosing a preschool with a good reputation and large space although the tuition fee was higher than the one recommended by her parents-in-law.

National preschool policies did not influence her choice. She had heard about the early childhood educational voucher scheme, the national evaluation of preschools and the official registration of preschools but she did not have any understanding of them. In addition, she had already made up her mind to send her son to Shuang School. The policies did not influence her choice.

*“I heard about the national evaluation but I did not enquire about it. Since I had a child, I would often catch a bus which passed Shuang School. I was amazed at the size of its site. I wanted to send my child to this setting. In addition, it had a good reputation. Therefore, I did not consider other schools and chose Shuang School for my son.”*

### Satisfaction

After nine months, Shieh was still pleased with her choice. From her perspective, the teacher was strict and maintained good discipline but also took a personal interest in her son. The teacher talked with her frequently. The curriculum was well organized and diverse. Her son sometimes brought vegetables home which he had grown in the



school garden. In addition, the preschool provided a videotape recording children's life at school for every parent. She was sure the teachers and staff worked very hard. However, her son sometimes did not want to go to preschool, not because he did not like the preschool but because he was free at home. From Shieh's perspective, her son was happy at Shuang School.

Although Shieh was satisfied with her choice of preschool, she was still under some pressure from her parents-in-law to move to a public preschool. They were careful about money. They thought Shuang School was expensive. They suggested she should choose a cheaper preschool. However, the school they recommended was in a small building without any outdoor space and it took children from three years old to eleven years old. Shieh did not want this but by the second interview she had considered moving her son to Chin Kindergarten when he was four years old because she had pressure from her parents-in-law. Shieh thought the teachers in a public kindergarten must be qualified. In addition, it was connected to the primary school and had outdoor space although it was not as big as Shuang School. On the other hand, she was worried that if she moved her son to other preschools he would need to work hard to adapt to a new situation (see Figure 4.4).

One month after the second interview (June 2006), Shieh informed me by email that she was still struggling with her dilemma. She made a table (Table 4.1) comparing Shuang School and Chin Kindergarten and sent it to me:

Table 4.1: The comparison between Shuan School and Chin Kindergarten

	<b>Shuan School</b>	<b>Chin Kindergarten</b>
<b>Space</b>	10,000 square meters	In an area of a primary school
<b>Green grass</b>	Outdoor space	No, only have plastic artificial grass
<b>Flower/vegetable garden</b>	Yes	No
<b>library</b>	One library	Staff office and library in the same room
<b>Swimming pool</b>	Yes	No
<b>Teacher: child ratios</b>	2:20	2:30
<b>Class</b>	Divided by different age	Mixed ages
<b>Tuition fee</b>	NT 10,890 (about 181.5 pounds per month)	NT 5,500 (about 92 pounds per month)
<b>School bus</b>	Yes. NT 1,200 (20 pounds per month)	No
<b>Parents-in-law's opinion</b>	Too expensive	Good, cheap
<b>Parents' opinion</b>	The quality was good	Mixed ages, the quality has to be considered
<b>Husband's opinion</b>	Expensive! Is it worth continuing?	It's cheaper and the environment was not bad. They can save lots of money so it might be a good choice.
<b>Her opinion</b>	Although the fee is higher than a public school, the quality of environment and curricula are good.	The fee is cheap. The environment is not bad but it is not good either. However, the money they save would give her son the opportunity to learn other skills.

The table showed her concern about the difference between these two preschools. On the one hand, Shuang School had a better environment, facilities and child-teacher ratios than Chin Kindergarten. On the other hand, the tuition fees were more

expensive than Chin Kindergarten. She could not make her decision and asked me to help. I gave her general information but tried to avoid having any influence on her choice. I suggested that she considered what she expected her son to gain from preschool education. Two months later (August 2006), Shieh told me that that she had not moved her son to Chin Kindergarten. She wrote:

*“I discussed it with my sisters-in-law. My parents-in-law finally understood what I wanted to provide for my son. They respected my choice. In the summer, the teachers took them to the swimming pool and my son loved it. Now, he told me that he likes to go to school. I think I made a right choice. In addition, I met a parent whose children were at Chin Primary School but had been to Shuang School, not Chin Kindergarten. She told me that her niece attended Chin Kindergarten and her abilities in Chinese phonetic symbols were behind when she attended the primary school. But her children first went to Shuang School and they did not have any problem and did very well when they were at primary school. I was glad to hear this. It supported my original choice.”*

### Summary

Shieh used clear criteria; spacious school grounds and a good reputation, in choosing Shuang School for her son. However, she lived with her parents-in-law. They had a different opinion to her about choosing a preschool. She struggled to find a balance between her preference and that of her parents-in-law. She liked Shuang School and believed it was good for her son but she could not ignore her parents-in-law's feeling. However, she was confident that her son would benefit from being at Shuang School but she did not have the same confidence in Chin Kindergarten. Therefore, she did not regret her initial choice.

#### **4.1.5 Parent Hsu**

Hsu has a Master's degree and is on the IT staff at a bank. Her husband has a Bachelor's degree and works in the IT department of a hospital. The family income is around two million Taiwanese dollars (thirty-three thousands pounds) per year. They live as a nuclear family and have only one child.

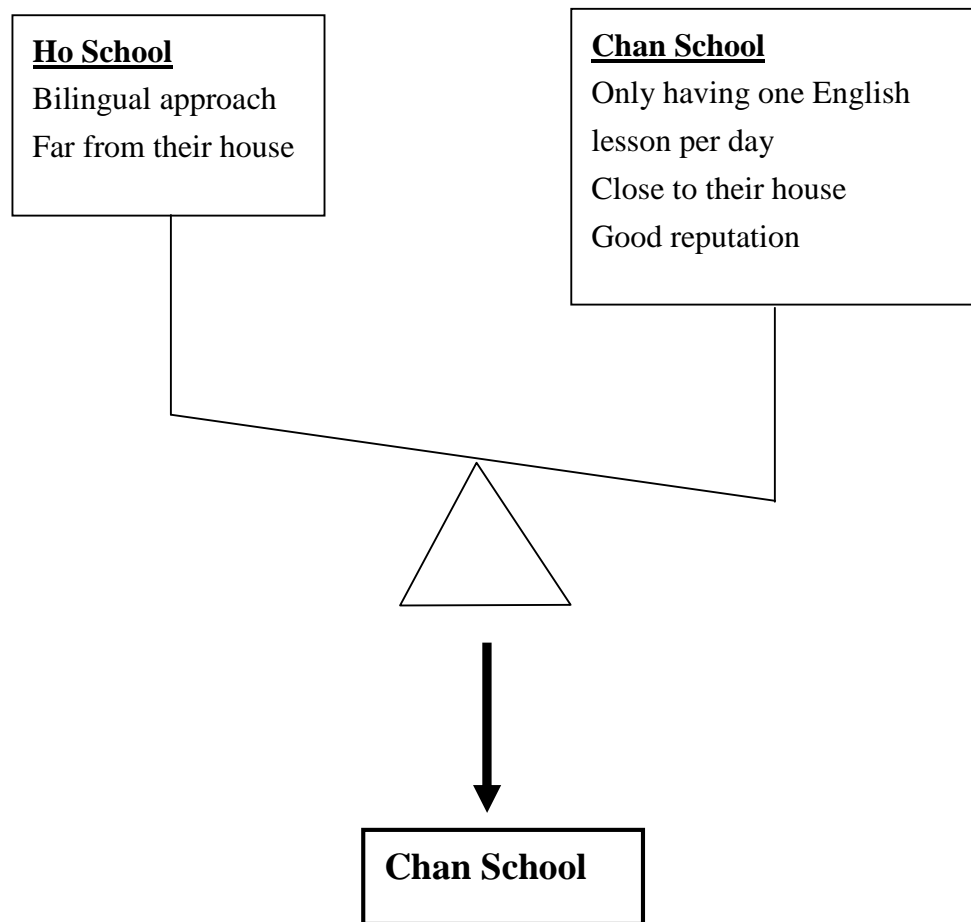
##### Why preschools?

Before her daughter started preschool, she was looked after by a child-minder, with whom she had good relationship. However, Hsu worried about her daughter's behaviour because she did not have many opportunities to interact with other children and did not know how to share with other people. These were important for her daughter. The child-minder was nice to her daughter. Both Hsu and her husband were busy and could not teach her know how to behave. She expected a preschool teacher and school life would help her daughter's personal, social and emotional development. She also expected her daughter to learn Chinese and English languages and arithmetic in preschool, especially after she was four years old.

##### Criteria for choosing a preschool

Hsu wanted her daughter to go to Ho School, which used a bilingual approach but was far from her house. She was concerned that her daughter needed enough sleep at this age. She chose a non-bilingual preschool which was close to her house. Chan School was recommended by a friend. Her friend's children behaved well and were making good progress. Therefore, she thought it was a good choice. Chan School had

a large indoor space and various facilities. One specific thing attracted her. Chan School taught Chinese poems to young children, which she believed would help children to develop Chinese literacy in the future. When asked about her preference for teachers, she said: *“I prefer a teacher with good disciplining skills”*. On the other hand, she did not pay attention on the qualifications of the teacher. She believed that a teacher’s character affected her child’s experience of schooling. She inquired about the disciplining and teaching styles of teachers from her friend and spoke to the head-teacher about these matters. There was only one English lesson every day in this preschool which she thought was not enough. In addition, her friend judged that the quality of English teaching was not good. She thought she might send her daughter to a cram school to learn English in the future. But it did not affect her choice (see Figure 4.5). Generally, from her perspective, the quality of this preschool was good. Furthermore, this preschool was one of employee welfare in her husband’s company. *“The fees are much cheaper than other preschools and that is quite important”* she said. Therefore, she and her husband decided this school would be good for their daughter.



**Figure 4.5: Hsu's decision making process**

#### Influences on her choice

From Hsu statements, her choice was influenced by her friends, her sisters and her husband. Hsu chose Chan School on her friend's recommendation. Concerned about the choice of a bilingual preschool or a traditional preschool, she consulted her sister-in-law who was teaching in a bilingual preschool and her own sister whose children were one year older than her daughter. She discussed her opinion with her husband and they visited the preschool together. However, when asked about the

influence of preschool policies on her choice she said that friends and relatives' experience and opinions were more important than national evaluation or educational vouchers. Therefore, national policies did not have any influence on her choice. For example, when asked about the educational vouchers scheme, she said

*"I saw the information on the web before. But I do not understand it. I think it is only for the children who are five years old. I don't know whether Chan School accepted the educational voucher. My child is young now. I may ask for further information in the future. Can the educational voucher be offered to children who study in a nursery?"*

### Satisfaction

After nine months experience, Hsu could see her daughter's improvement in expression and self-management. She enjoyed her preschool life and made some friends in the school but was still not generous in sharing with other children. Generally, she was satisfied with her daughter's improvement.

In general, she was happy with the provision of Chan School. According to the first interview, she was worried about the quality and quantity of English lessons but she was delighted with her daughter's English achievements. She said *"I heard my daughter sing English songs and sometime she spoke some English words to me"*. She was pleased with the curricula that the preschool offered but she did not pay attention to how the teachers organized the curricula or activities. The teacher had interacted well with her and her daughter. She reported her daughter's improvement and also bad habits to her regularly. She could feel the teacher's high standards on children's self-management and behaviour which met her preference. She mentioned that she

would recommend Chan School to her friends because her daughter enjoyed her preschool life.

One point is important. Hsu said that she did not expect the school to provide much cognitive learning but she had made many efforts to help her daughter's study of Chinese or English, such as making flash cards by herself or reading textbooks with her. In addition, she searched the website which introduced her to the Montessori approach and taught her how to make Montessori tools. She made tools to help her daughter's arithmetic learning. She did not visit many preschools nor make many requests to schools. Unlike some of the parents, she attached great importance to sharing responsibility for her daughter's education.

### Summary

Hsu was more concerned about her daughter's feelings and experiences than other criteria. When she chose a preschool, she was concerned about the quality of her daughter's sleep. In addition, she had some expectation for academic learning in preschool but she did not pay much attention to what the preschool curriculum had to offer to her daughter. She believed it was a good school because her daughter was happy there. Her daughter liked her peers and teachers, and enjoyed her preschool life. She also showed improvement in clear expression, social skills and self-management. Hsu was satisfied with Chan School and would like to recommend it to her friends.



## **4.2 The “Know what I want but changed my mind” parents**

Chen, Jun and Siao started with clear criteria for choosing a preschool. They used their criteria to compare the quality of preschools. However, their children’s experience changed their conception of a “good” preschool. Consequently, they considered moving their children to other preschools.

### **4.2.1 Parent Chen**

Chen has a two year college certificate and works in the IT department of the Taipei Financial Centre. Her husband is studying for a Master’s degree at the time of the interviews and is a civil servant in Taipei. The family’s income is around one million five hundred thousand Taiwanese dollars (twenty-five thousand pounds) per year. They have two daughters and Chen was selecting a preschool for her elder daughter. Their younger daughter was looked after by Chen’s mother. Chen and her husband spend a lot of time travelling everyday because Chen’s parents live a long way from their house. They live as a nuclear family but Chen’s parents-in-law live close by.

#### **Why preschools?**

Chen cared intensely about her daughter’s education. Before attending preschool, her daughter had been looked after by Chen’s mother and Chen prepared many books, VCDs and DVDs for her daughter to read and watch with her grandmother. However, Chen had found that her daughter’s desire for acquiring new knowledge was strong and she was not satisfied with reading books or watching DVDs with her grandmother for a whole day. Chen wanted to send her daughter to a preschool but she did not

want to take the risk of sending her daughter to the wrong preschool. When I met her for the first time and gave her the diary, she told me that she had visited some preschools already. She was not in a hurry to make a decision initially but she found her daughter was not making progress. She also believed that her daughter needed to learn how to work with other children because she was spoiled at home. For these reasons, she decided to look actively for a preschool. By the time of the first interview, she had visited ten different preschools in order to choose the most appropriate one for her daughter.

#### Criteria for choosing a preschool

Chen's second daughter was looked after by Chen's mother so Chen considered preschools close to her parents' house, her own place of work and her own house. Chen mentioned that she had clear criteria for selecting a preschool. First of all, she was concerned about the hygiene standards of the preschool. Secondly, the quality of teachers was important to her. She spoke to head-teachers and teachers when she visited preschools. She was concerned about the head-teacher's knowledge of early childhood education and the teachers' enthusiasm for teaching and caring for young children. Therefore, she observed the interaction between teachers and children, and their way of talking when she visited a preschool. However, she stated that she was not concerned about teachers' qualifications but their characters and their temperaments.

She also mentioned her preference for a particular teaching approach. She did not like the Montessori approach because she thought it provided too much freedom for children and the children would lack discipline. When asked about why she had this

perspective, she responded that she read some articles and followed a discussion on a website between parents and primary school teachers who had this perspective. She preferred a preschool using a bilingual approach as she wanted her daughter to learn English.

*“I do not mind what curricula the school offer her, such as using themes or based on different subjects, as long as she has to use English. I want to provide an English language environment for her.”*

Some preschools used a bilingual approach but foreign teachers taught several classes in the same preschool. She preferred them to be in one class all the time. In this way children would have more opportunities to speak to the foreign teacher.

She visited ten preschools before making her decision. One preschool used the Montessori approach. The preschool was small and had very limited facilities; therefore she did not choose it. Another preschool had a good reputation; however, it had thirty children and only two teachers in the class. She felt the size of the class was too big for young children. The other two schools she rejected belonged to a big preschool organization. They used a whole English language approach or a bilingual approach but the physical environment was not well organized. They had many facilities but not for preschool children to use. One of them had a big library but not many books. Chen also visited one public kindergarten but she did not trust the quality of teachers and the curricula in public preschools. She went to visit the public preschool because her mother-in-law's asked her to. In the end only three out of the ten preschools met her criteria (see Figure 4.6).

Chen considered Le School because many directors and managers in her company

sent their children there and they were satisfied with their children's progress. Chen trusted their judgments because they were in a high position in the company. When she visited Le School, she thought the general quality of Le School matched her criteria except it did not use a bilingual approach. Parents could pay extra fees for learning English in Le School. Chen thought her daughter could still learn English in the preschool so she seriously considered Le School. However, when she visited Le School for the second time, with her daughter, she found a child with special needs was in the class. One teacher had to give him full attention to care for him. Consequently, another teacher had to look after twenty-two children so she could not consider children's individual needs. In addition, during the summer holidays, she had found out that Le School had some primary school aged students; ten to eleven years old. She said "*my daughter is only three years old. I think it is dangerous to be in the same environment with them*". Therefore, she did not choose Le school.

Wen School was recommended to Chen by her sister. It had a good variety of facilities such as a swimming pool and a library. Wen School also provided live video links online to enable parents to watch their children's school life. School meals were good and it also offered breakfast for children which met Chen's needs. Her sister had decided to send her daughter to Wen School and Chen liked this school as well. However, her husband thought that Wen School was too far not only from Chen's parents' house but also from their own house, which made it inconvenient. The child-teacher ratios were high compared to Kai School. It only had one Chinese teacher and one foreign teacher with thirty children. Consequently, her husband suggested sending their daughter to Kai School.

The tuition fee of Kai School was the highest compared to the other nine preschools

but this did not deter Chen. It met her criteria as it was a bilingual school which had a variety of modern facilities, good school meals, a clean environment, low child-teacher ratios and high quality teachers and head teacher. In Kai School, only sixteen children were in the three-year-old class with one Chinese teacher, one assistant teacher and one foreign teacher. The Chinese teacher and the assistant teacher stayed with the children for the whole day. The foreign teacher was in charge of morning lessons and was with the children in the morning. Chen was satisfied with this. She believed the head-teacher in Kai School had a clear understanding and a 'correct' knowledge of preschool education because she had published many articles on the school's website. Chen visited Kai School three times before making her decision. She observed the teaching styles of teachers and asked them about their backgrounds. She requested a particular three-year-old class (there were two three-year-old classes in Kai School) where the main Chinese teacher had a Master's degree and a preschool qualification from Japan. The foreign teacher also had a nice teaching style. A key factor affecting her choice was the graduation ceremony of Kai School. Chen attended graduations at both Le School and Kai School. She explained that many children at Kai School spoke fluent English at the ceremony. On the other hand, at Le School many of the children froze on the stage.

*"Let me talk about Le School first. Its graduation ceremony was in the traditional style which was similar to the graduations we had in our childhood. They trained every child to give a speech in the ceremony but less than ten percent of them could speak fluently without stage fright. In Kai School, eighty percent of children could do it and around seventy percent of them could do it in English fluently. My daughter is the first child in my family. She is quite shy. She always hides behind us when she meets people. Therefore, I am concerned about children's performance in the ceremonies. Other parents may not worry about it, if their children are outgoing. In addition, the performances and activities at Kai School's ceremony were well designed but not at Le School."*

This experience was the final factor in making her decision to choose Kai School for her daughter. By the time of the first interview, her daughter had been to Kai School for a couple of weeks. Chen found her daughter enjoyed her preschool life. She did not need to ask her about “*what has the teacher taught you today?*” She always spoke some English vocabulary in her conversation such as “No”, “Thank you”. Chen felt that English language naturally became a part of her speech.

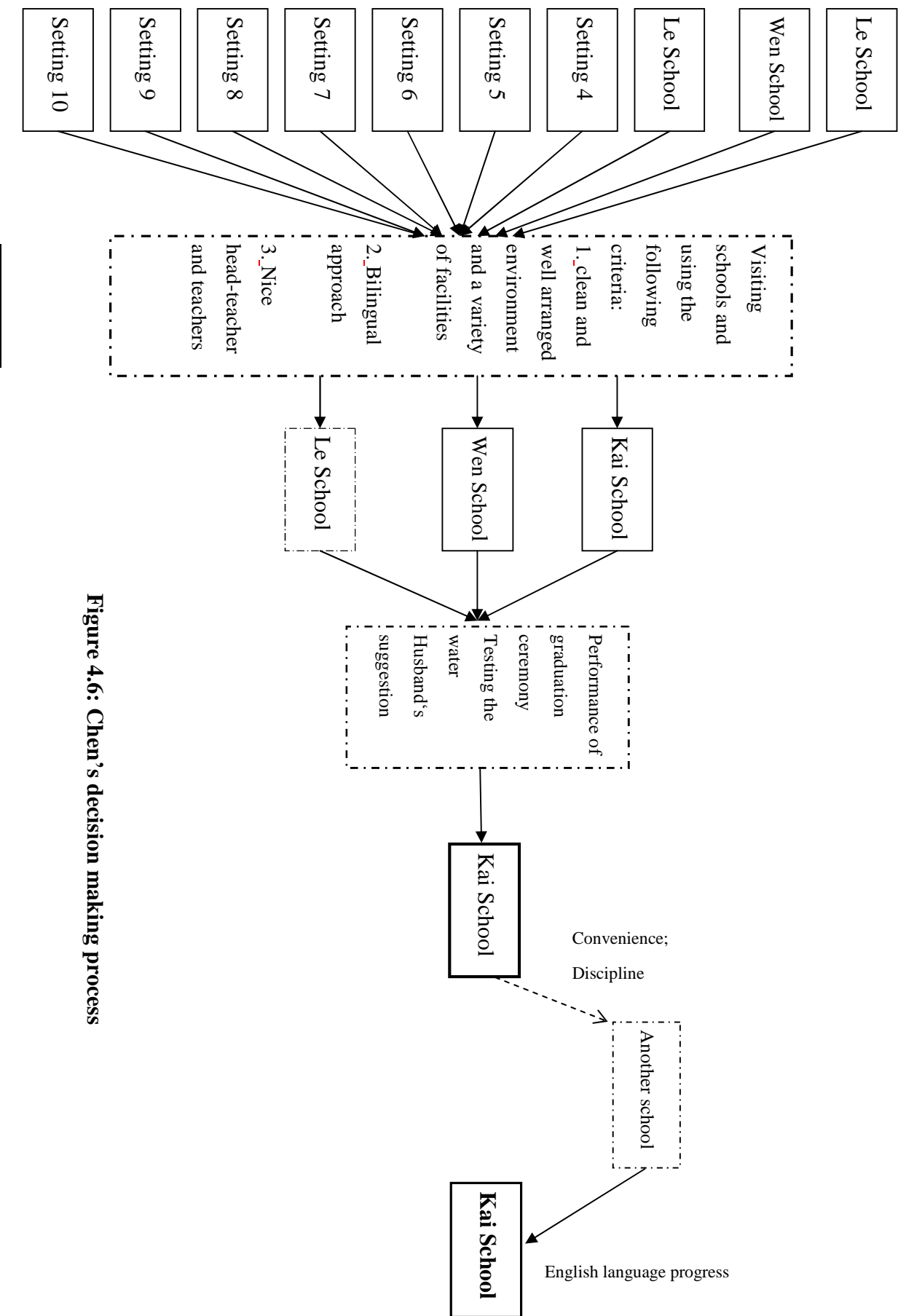


Figure 4.6: Chen's decision making process

### Influences on her choice

Chen mentioned that she had a sister whose child was one year older than her daughter and they had similar values and beliefs about their children's education. They discussed and shared ideas about preschool education with each other. They visited Kai School and Wen School together. Chen also visited the preschools which were close to her company with her colleagues, but she said that she did not take her colleagues' opinions into account. On the other hand, she trusted the opinions of her directors and managers, and gave thought to sending her daughter to the preschool that their children attended.

The influence of her parents-in-law was not strong although they suggested she considered a public preschool. She visited the preschool but did not take it seriously. Her husband played an important role in decision making. She mentioned that when she thought about Wen School and Kai School, her husband provided a clear comparison between these two schools which she had not thought about carefully.

Chen searched for information on the school website and discussion board online. For example, she did not like the Montessori approach because of the discussions she had read on one discussion board.

Preschool policies did not have a strong influence on Chen's choice. She searched for preschools which gained an "excellent" score for the national evaluation of preschools from the government website but she doubted the results. She provided an example in that Le School had an "excellent" score for the national evaluation; however, its quality was not as good as she had expected. She also found most of the "excellent"



schools were public preschools. Consequently, she did not trust the results of the national evaluation of preschools. When asked about the early childhood educational voucher scheme, she had clear information about it. Conversely, although she had seen the registration certificate of Kai School she could not say how it was registered. For Chen, there was no difference between preschools registered as a “nursery” or a “kindergarten”. It was more important for her that a preschool met her criteria rather than met the requirements of official registration of preschools.

### Satisfaction

At her second interview, after nine months, she was satisfied to an extent but she also had some real concerns.

#### ***- physical environment***

She talked about her satisfaction with the physical environment. She appreciated the arrangement of the classroom which was related to the different themes of the curricula and was changed every week. She mentioned that the school had a professional studio for children to do painting. All the painting tools were imported from a foreign country and the facilities in the room allowed children to fully enjoy painting. However, she found that the children did not have many opportunities to use the studio. There was also a commercial sized ball-pool but her daughter had only used it less than twenty times in the nine months she had been there. Chen was delighted with the library in the first interview and also in the second interview because it had many books and allowed parents to borrow books for their children before six o'clock, but the books were not well managed.

Consequently, whilst it had been the preschool's facilities which attracted her to choose it, she felt disappointed with the opportunities the children had to use these facilities. She said that she could have found other preschools with better facilities than Kai School, in the same fee range<sup>23</sup>.

***- the quality of teachers***

The second point that she mentioned was her satisfaction with the teachers. She was content with the foreign teacher's conscientiousness. From Chen's perspective, foreign teachers in preschools in Taiwan were only responsible for English teaching. They seldom paid attention to children's behaviour or needs. She was delighted with the foreign teacher. Her daughter's foreign teacher did not only teach English language but also interacted and played with the children. She had well prepared teaching materials and the themed arrangement of the classroom reflected this. The English language skills of her daughter had improved.

However, Chen said that she did not like the main teacher at the beginning because she did not have a sensitive character. From Chen's description, her way of walking and talking appeared to be careless. She used to speak to the children loudly which Chen did not like. Chen also worried about the teacher's disciplinary skills. However, when Chen had needed to discuss some problems that her daughter had, she found the main teacher knew each individual child well so she trusted her ability to care and educate children.

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<sup>23</sup> Her family income was about 25,000 pounds per year and the tuition of Kai School was about 5,000 pounds per year.

***- children's changes***

When Chen talked about her daughter's progress in English language, she acknowledged her improvement. She mentioned that she had tried to teach her daughter the English letters of the alphabet before she attended a preschool but had been frustrated by it. She was surprised that her daughter could remember the English alphabet one month after starting preschool. She also could count up to one hundred in English. There were many activities related to the English curriculum and her daughter enjoyed her preschool life, which was important for Chen.

However, she felt disappointed about her daughter's behaviour. After attending school, her daughter did not obey their requirements at home and shouted at her or her husband. When Chen talked to the teachers about this she discovered that there were parents in Kai School who were wealthy (because the fee was high) and had strong opinions about disciplining children. The teachers could not follow their own views on discipline and correct children's behaviour in the preschool because the head teacher accepted what parents required and she always put parents' opinions first. Chen could not accept the rudeness of her daughter. Her husband even suggested moving to other schools. Nevertheless, Chen thought that if they still wanted to choose a preschool with similar standards, then other parents' attitudes might be similar to parents in Kai School. She chose to speak to the main teacher about their expectations of their daughter's behaviour and they worked together.

**- difficult decision: Convenience vs. English achievement**

Whilst she was not happy with her daughter's behaviour she did not want to move her daughter to the other preschool because she liked the curriculum in Kai School and was satisfied with her daughter's improvement in English language learning. This was a strong influence on her choice, and she even chose the preschool for her younger daughter despite the fact that Kai School was near her parents' house but far from their own house. It would have been more convenient to move both her daughters to a preschool which was close to their own house but she believed the curriculum in Kai School benefited her daughters' English achievement. As for the discipline, she believed they might have similar problems in other preschools. In Kai School, at least the main teacher accepted her opinions about correcting her daughter's behaviour. If she changed to another preschool, there would be a risk about her English achievement and no guarantee that her behaviour would be better. Rationally, Chen chose Kai School for both her two daughters. However, it was a difficult decision.

**- the changes of defining a "quality" school**

At the end of the second interview, Chen declared that her criteria for choosing a school had been changed by her daughter's experience at the preschool. She said

*"the quality of school facilities is not important because children might not have many opportunities to use the facilities. I think the quality of teachers affects the quality of preschool education. The teachers are always with the children. The activities and curricula are arranged by them. Their knowledge might affect what they offer children and their attitudes might influence the children's behaviour."*

Chen also pointed out that parents should also get information from other people because different people have different values. Parents had to spend some time talking to teachers and observing their interaction with children. She told me that her husband had told her at the beginning that the most important influence on preschool quality was the quality of teachers. She now agrees with her husband after having these experiences.

### Summary

Chen put a lot of effort into selecting an appropriate preschool for her daughter. She referred to her sister's opinion and her colleagues' experience and searched for useful information from websites. She recorded every detail of each preschool which she visited and compared the differences between them but she still could not find a preschool which perfectly matched her expectation of a "quality" preschool. From Chen's values, English language learning was very important because she could not provide an environment using English language at home. She believed Kai School could complement it, although she worried about her daughter's inappropriate behaviour. As a result, she had some dissatisfaction with Kai School but it still was her first choice for her daughters.

#### 4.2.2 Parent Jun

Jun was a journalist before having a child but by the time of the interviews, she was a housewife and her husband was a medical doctor. She has a Master's degree from the UK. They used to live in Taipei. However, her husband had to work in Taitung for two years and they lived in there from July 2003 to June 2005. The family income is around two million Taiwanese dollars (thirty-six thousands pounds) per year. They live with their two children as a nuclear family.

##### Why preschools?

Before I contacted Jun, her son already had preschool experience. When they lived in Taitung, she had another baby and felt she could not look after two children. She could not find an appropriate child-minder and therefore, she sent her first child, who was only fourteen months old, to Ae School, which is opposite their house. She did not collect any information about other preschools because she was in hurry. However, her son did not have a good experience as his teacher's child was in the same class and he was attacked by his teacher's child several times. She informed the teacher but the situation did not improve. Therefore, her son did not go to preschool until they moved back to Taipei County six months later, where I first interviewed her.

After they moved back to Taipei, Jun sent her son to Bi School which was again opposite to her house. Jun was happy with the clean environment of this preschool. However, after two weeks and he caught an Enterovirus<sup>24</sup> so he had to stay at home

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<sup>24</sup> Enteroviruses are ubiquitous, enterically transmitted viruses that cause a wide spectrum of both common and uncommon illnesses among infants and children.

for one week. Jun was disappointed that the teacher had not telephoned her when her son was ill and stayed at home. She also mentioned that the teacher was too young; she always described her son's behaviour negatively which made her uncomfortable and displeased. She stopped sending her son to Bi School and visited the other three preschools before the first interview taking place. She chose Choc School for her son (See Figure 4.7).

#### Criteria for choosing a preschool

Jun considered three preschools which were close to her house because she did not want her child to have a long journey every day and she wanted to be able to observe him at school sometimes. When asked what she was looking for she mentioned the good facilities, a spacious and clean environment, English language teaching with foreign teachers, low child-teacher ratios, nice school meals, good teacher-parent and teacher-child interaction and qualified teachers. Jun seemed to have clear criteria for her choice. Rin School and Choc School which were clean and had big indoor space, nice school meals and good facilities (such as a big ball-pool or LCD computers) met her criteria of good preschools. However, she did not talk about the teachers' quality or child-teacher ratios at either preschool.

She chose Choc School for her son because it had English language lessons for the whole morning and a foreign teacher taught a half hour lesson every day, whereas Rin School did not. In addition, she preferred the clear teaching and learning scheme and the fixed timetable. Choc School could tell her which textbooks they used but the head-teacher of Rin School had not made her mind up about textbooks. She also chose Choc School because she found it easy to communicate with the head-teacher.

The head-teacher listened to her suggestions about school meals and allowing children to take textbooks home; thus she believed the head-teacher was good.

However, from the interview it appeared that her criteria for a good preschool were different from her criteria for choosing a preschool. For example, she had unhappy experiences of teachers at Ae School and Bi School, so she told me that a good preschool should have teachers with teaching and caring experience, patience and good communication skills. However, she did not seem to know anything about the teachers in Choc School or Rin School. She felt it was rude to ask about teachers' background.

*“I think it is rude and unfriendly to ask their background. I think my son's teacher majored in early childhood education but I am not sure. For the foreign teacher, I only know that she came from the Netherlands but I have no idea about her qualifications. I think even if I asked about their qualification, they would not tell me the truth.”*

Her criteria for choosing a preschool focused on English language teaching, fixed timetables, textbooks and a head-teacher who listened to her suggestions. During the interview, she spent much time talking about the importance of English language learning for young children. This appeared to be the key reason for her choice.



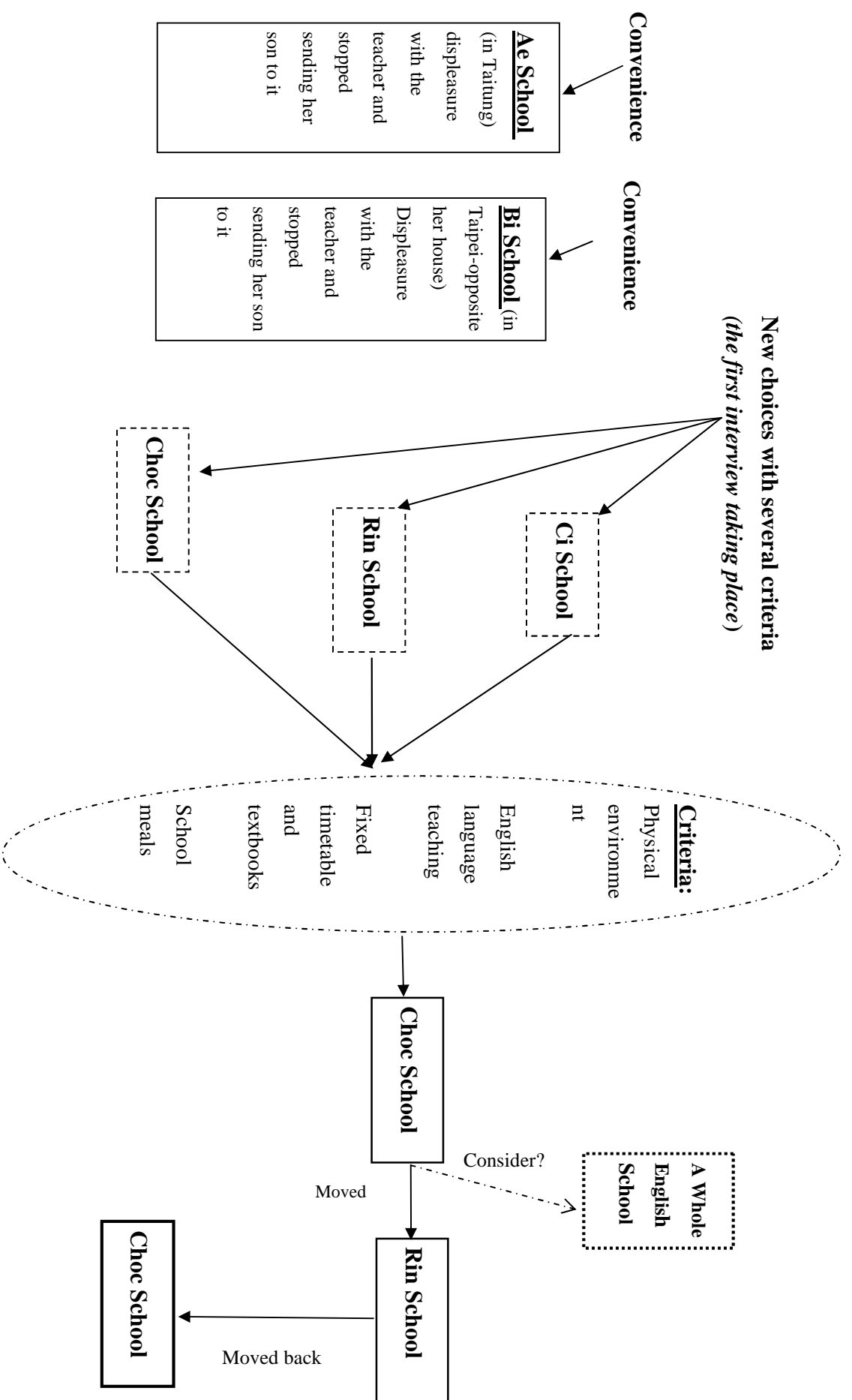


Figure 4.7: Jun's decision making process

### Influences on her choice

Jun used both external and internal social networks to gain information about preschools. She discussed them with her sister, whose children were older than hers, and with her neighbours. The web is also important in getting information. However, her husband was not an important influence on her. When Jun decided on the preschool, she invited her husband to visit it with her. As they did not live with their parents, the grandparents did not take a part in the selection process.

Jun's knowledge about preschool policies appeared limited and confused. She knew about the need for registration but was not concerned about whether the preschools she visited were officially registered. The head-teacher in Choc School showed her the registration certificate but she did not know whether it was registered as a nursery, a kindergarten or a cram school. However, she noticed that the name on the certificate was different from the name of the preschool, and the number of pupils was more than stated on the certificate. Moreover, she said that two buildings had been combined to become one whole preschool but the registration certificated related to only one of the buildings. Jun mentioned that she was confused as to how this affected their registration but it did not affect her decision to send her son to Choc School.

When asked about the early childhood educational voucher scheme in Taiwan, she was clear. She knew that she could apply for the voucher when her son was five years old but she complained that providing 10,000 Taiwanese dollars (165 British pounds) and only being available for five-year-old children was not enough to support families. However, she did not have a clear understanding of the national evaluation of

preschools.

*“I think it only applies in Taipei city. Does it apply in Taipei County? I think it is only for measuring the hygiene of preschools. I wasn’t concerned about the national evaluation of preschools when I chose a school. Only public preschools get high evaluation scores, right? I don’t want to send my son to a public preschool. A public preschool only has lessons until half past three. It is too short and too early to come home.”*

Jun’s major concern appeared to be about the physical environment and English language teaching of preschools. She had strong customer behaviour in her relationship with the preschool service. She moved her son from one preschool to another preschool because she was not satisfied with the provisions.

By the time of the second interview her son had stopped going to Choc School. He had attended for the first semester, but after the winter holiday he stopped going. The reasons she gave were that the weather was too cold and therefore it was difficult to wake him up every morning and he did not want to go. Consequently he missed the morning lessons which were about cognitive knowledge such as English literacy or arithmetic and the lessons in the afternoon were only for drawing and singing. She said that she would let her son stay at home until the weather was warmer. At the time of the second interview, he had still not gone back to the preschool.

### Satisfaction

Even though originally she was very concerned about her son being taught English she did not mention any change in his language capabilities. However, as Jun’s son had not been to the preschool since the winter holidays, she may not have been aware

of any changes. She did mention however that his interaction with his sister had not improved. Sometimes, he still attacked her. However, she found some improvement in her son's co-operation with her, such as willingness to wash dishes after eating and brush his teeth, and he was willing to take medicine when he was sick.

When asked about her satisfaction with Choc School, there were many things about which she was dissatisfied. She was pleased that the teacher had patience and a good manner and that she trained children quite well in self-management, such as going to the toilet. However, she was not happy with the foreign teacher as she did not know what curriculum she was following or her teaching plans.

Her other concern had been the physical environment of Choc School and she agreed that it was clean but only had indoor space. Children were infected with colds easily. In addition, the toilets for girls did not have doors and she believed that might affect children's appropriate behaviour. There was no outdoor playground but there was a park opposite the school, although the children seldom had any opportunity to play there. There was a ball-pool and equipment for children to play and climb which attracted her in the first place but the children were not given many opportunities to use them. The teacher told Jun that this was because Jun's son had jumped from the top of ball-pool and the teacher was afraid he might do it again.

Jun was also annoyed that the timetable for the class had been changed. She had chosen Choc School because there was an English lesson every day taught by a foreign teacher. Consequently, the tuition fees were more expensive than other preschools but at the time that there should have been an English lesson it did not happen. The head-teacher and the teacher gave different reasons for this. The teacher

told her that the English abilities of the children in the class differed; some children were able to sit and learn English (and her son was one of them) and they had English lessons every day. But other children, who did not have the ability to learn English, stayed in their classroom and had another lesson. On the other hand, the head-teacher told to her that the children did have English every morning but recently they needed to complete a collection of art works which was going to be displayed to parents. The teacher had been absent for several weeks having a baby so they needed to catch up on these works. Jun was annoyed with this explanation. She said *“Is it important to present children’s arts collection to parents? They could use another time to do that”*. She did not believe their explanations and felt disappointed with Choc School. However, when asked her opinion of the curriculum, she was happy to display her child’s arts collection (in a scrapbook) and mentioned art was good for developing children’s fine motor skills and helped children’s concentration.

Not surprisingly, Jun also expressed her concern about the school meals. She had been delighted when the head-teacher had accepted her suggestions about school meals during her first visit but by the time of the second interview she felt the amount of food provided for the children was not enough. Her son was too hungry to walk back home and her husband had to carry him so she had had to prepare milk for him to drink before he set off for home. Furthermore, there was a gap between lessons finishing and the time her husband could collect their son. She found that the children were gathered in the reception area to watch TV and wait for their parents to pick them up. She did not think it was a good idea to let the children watch TV. She believed children could be doing something more interesting.

Whilst the school had not lived up to her expectations this had not caused her to move

her son yet. However, she still put much emphasis on her son's ability in English literacy and would prefer a school with a whole English approach. She told me in the second interview:

*“During the next academic year, my son will be three years old and my plan is to move him to a whole English School for two years and then move him back to Choc School when he is five years old. At that age he would need to learn Chinese Phonetic Symbols in order to be ready for primary school.”*

She thought if her son stayed in a whole English school until he went to primary school, his ability in Chinese literacy may get behind.

However, a month after the second interview, Jun informed me by email that she had a part time job and had sent her son to Rin School; another school she had originally considered. Rin School also had English language teaching taught by a foreign teacher for whole morning lessons. However, once she went to the school and saw all the children were sitting in the classroom to wait for the teacher because she was busy settling her own child in her class. This situation had previously occurred in Ae School (her son's first preschool in Taitung) and caused her to stop sending her son to Rin School. She decided to move her son back to the Choc School. When asked why she had not sent her son to a whole English School, she responded that the school was far from their house. Her husband suggested having a foreign teacher to be her son's personal tutor and her son therefore stayed at Choc School.

Jun's experience led her to suggest that when choosing a preschool, parents should visit when the school was in session. Parents should not listen to what head-teachers or teachers tell to them or observe beautiful teaching materials and equipment without

seeing how the children use these facilities. Therefore, it is necessary for the parents to spend time visiting a preschool and observing the teaching.

### Summary

This is a complex case. Jun had moved her son to four preschools in one year because she could not find a preschool which perfectly matched her criteria. She knew that she wanted a preschool which had a clean environment, professional facilities, a nice head teacher, foreign teachers, English language teaching and good school meals. However, when she found something with which she was not satisfied, she moved her son to another preschool. At the end of this research, she still could not find a perfect preschool for her son.

### **4.2.3 Parent Siao**

Siao's sister-in-law has a business in a wholesale market and Siao and her husband work for her. Siao has a senior high school certificate and her husband has a junior high school certificate. They have two children and live with her husband's parents. However, they have a foreign housemaid to look after their children. Siao was looking for a preschool for her four-year-old daughter. Her family income is about one million two hundred thousand Taiwanese dollars (about twenty thousand pounds) per year.

#### Why preschools?

Although preschool education is not compulsory, Siao's personal experience made her want to send her daughter to a preschool when she was four years old. Siao, herself, had only had six months experience of preschool education and when she went to primary school, she was behind the other students and did not achieve well. She did not want her daughter to have a similar experience. She also hoped that her daughter could be happy without being frustrated with her studies. Primary school readiness and enjoying learning were her aims when sending her daughter to a preschool. She also expected her daughter to learn how to express herself well and have good behaviour after attending a preschool. From Siao's perspective, having a preschool experience would help children to prepare for primary school.

#### Criteria for choosing a preschool

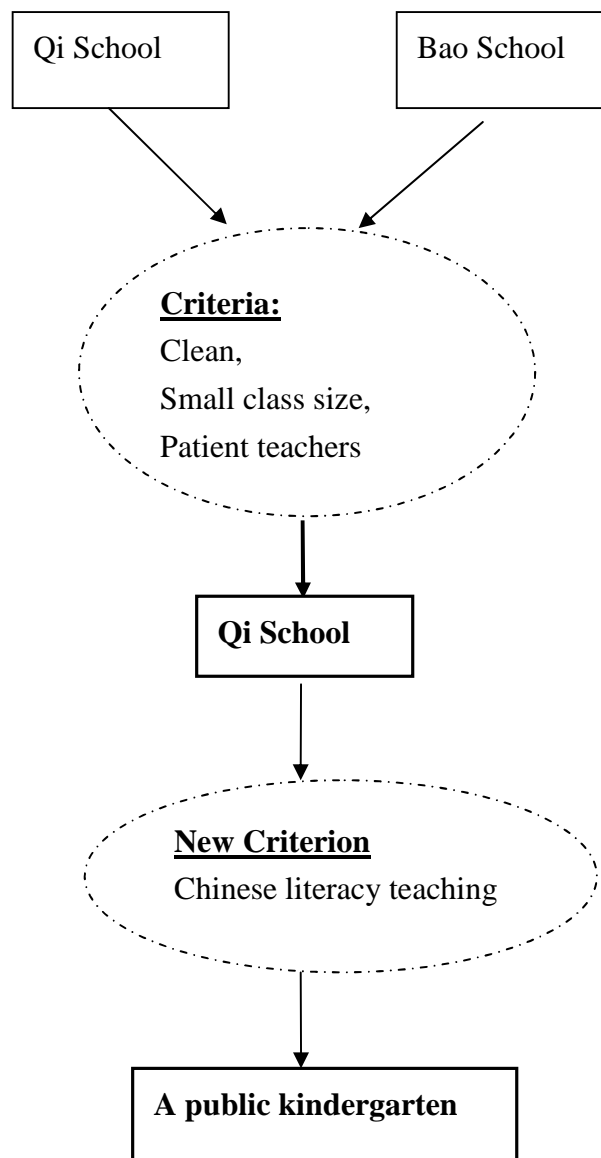
Siao looked for a preschool with a clean environment and small sized classes. She believed if the environment was not clean, children might get infections easily and



they could not learn well. In a small class, children would have the teachers' attention for their individual needs. She preferred teachers with patience because when her daughter was three years old she went to a preschool for only a few days. On the first day, she was in a conflict with another child but the teacher did not have the skills to resolve the problem and had punished her. She said:

*“My daughter was afraid to go to the school. I believe if a teacher was patient, she would find the solution for children or talk to parents in order to correct the child's behaviour.”*

Now that her daughter was four she was considering preschools again. She visited two preschools, Qi School and Bao School, and compared them. Bao School was the biggest preschool near their house and Qi School was recommended by her sister-in-law. Bao School had a big outdoor space but the floors of the classrooms were not clean. The classes in Bao School were big and the number of children in the class was about twenty-four to twenty-six. Qi School had small classes, with only twelve children with two teachers. The environment was clean. She also liked the curricula in Qi School because it had many activities such as visiting a fire station, a zoo or a botanical garden. Qi School used a whole English language approach. From Siao's perspective, they taught children arithmetic and language through play. Although the tuition fee was more expensive than Bao School (almost twice as much), Siao still preferred Qi School and chose it for her daughter (see Figure 4.8).



**Figure 4.8: Siao's decision making process**

### Influences on her choice

Siao mentioned that she had collected information about preschool education since her daughter was two years old. She asked her relatives and friends about their experiences. From this, she built her criteria for choosing a preschool but she did not have strong opinions. She trusted her sister-in-law's opinion, "*She was careful about selecting a school. If she thought it was good, I think it should be good*". Qi School was recommended by her sister-in-law.

When asked about the influence of preschool policies on her choice, Siao lacked knowledge. She knew Qi School was registered as a nursery because her sister-in-law told her, but she did not know the difference between a kindergarten and a nursery. She did not know anything about the national evaluation of preschools or the early childhood educational voucher scheme. Therefore, preschool policies did not have any influence on her choice.

### Satisfaction

By the time of the second interview, after ten months experience of preschool, her daughter still attended Qi School but Siao had decided to move her to a public kindergarten when the new semester started (Autumn 2006). The reason was because teachers did not teach Chinese phonetic symbols in Qi School and she was afraid that her daughter might get behind when she started primary school. She compared her sister-in-law's child and her brother's children's achievements in primary school. Her sister-in-law's son had attended Qi School which used a whole English language approach. When he was in a primary school, he had difficulty learning Chinese

phonetic symbols and this affected his other academic achievements. He had to have a personal tutor to help him to catch up when he was in the first year of primary school education. Siao said that he had to spend more time and his mother had to spend more money on his learning. On the other hand, her brother's children had attended a public kindergarten. The kindergarten used Chinese to teach students and focused on Chinese reading but they did not learn English. Then teachers asked parents to read books with their children at home. Her nephews had good abilities in reading Chinese and had good achievements when they were in a primary school. Their experiences led her to think about moving her daughter to a public kindergarten. However, Siao mentioned that there was no public kindergarten accepting four-year-old children near their house. They only accepted children from five years old. Siao complained that this caused parents to send their children to private schools. She said that the educational authority should provide enough public kindergartens for everyone.

In addition, Siao found that her daughter could not understand what the foreign teacher taught her and "*The foreign teacher is strict but does not have patience*" she said. Her daughter felt frustrated. However, Siao said that she tried hard to help her daughter by listening to an English CD but her daughter did not enjoy it. From Siao's perspective, her daughter's English had improved by the time of the second interview but she was not interested in learning English.

Qi School had small classes, and this, Siao believed, had meant that her daughter had more attention from the teachers so her behaviour and self-expression had improved. Siao also felt that the physical facilities, the quality of teachers and the children were better in Qi School than in a public kindergarten. This put her in a dilemma but she was concerned about primary school readiness, and had therefore decided to move her

daughter to a public kindergarten (see Figure 4.8). However, Siao admitted that if she had not had relatives' (or friends') children with the experience of a whole English language preschool and a public kindergarten, she could not have compared their achievements, and would not have discovered the problem of attending a whole English language preschool. Nonetheless, her daughter's experience with the foreign teacher led her to suggest that parents visited every preschool they were considering before making a choice. Parents needed to observe the teacher's attitudes towards children and children's reactions during the lessons.

At the end of interview, Siao mentioned that her aim in sending her daughter to a preschool was so that she could be ready for her future education. She hoped her daughter would be motivated to learn. She realized if she wanted to achieve this goal, she had to find out what her interests were, but did not push her to accept what adults offered. In Qi School, she pushed her to learn English and spent much time on it. She realized that it was not her aim to send her daughter to a school if her daughter could not enjoy learning English. Siao and her husband decided to move her to a public kindergarten. In doing so, from her nephews' experience, she believed that her daughter would have more time to do what she liked to do.

### Summary

Before her daughter had preschool experience, Siao thought a clean environment and a small class would be important. For learning, she thought children only needed to improve their self-expression and behaviour at the preschool stage. She thought children would be prepared for primary school, just by having preschool experience. Although she chose Qi School which used a whole English language approach, she

did not mention the importance of English. She chose Qi School because she believed her sister-in-law's choice and she liked the environment of the school. However, her nephews' experience affected her expectation of preschool education and influenced her to move her daughter to a public kindergarten. Siao compared the achievements of her sister-in-law's son and her brother's children in primary schools in making her choice and she was concerned about Chinese language learning for her daughter. She decided to move her to a public kindergarten. She believed her daughter would enjoy learning in a public kindergarten rather than in a whole English language school. Siao was concerned about children's education but did not show confidence in the process of choosing a preschool. Although she had her criteria for choosing a preschool, she was influenced by her daughter's and nephews' experience, and changed her mind. She wanted her daughter to enjoy learning and be well prepared for primary education.

### **4.3 The “Don’t know what I want but I will know it when I see it” parents**

For these parents, the process of selecting a preschool was the process of constructing their criteria of an appropriate preschool from their visits. They started with ambiguous criteria and visited preschools in order to understand what their criteria of “quality” were. The following cases present parents’ dilemma in choosing a preschool and how they developed their criteria of a good preschool.

#### **4.3.1 Parent Ming**

Ming was the only male participant in this research. He has a Bachelor’s degree and is on the IT staff of a bank. His wife has a two year college certificate and is on the staff of an insurance company. Their family income is about one million and five hundred thousands Taiwanese dollars (twenty-five thousand pounds) per year. They have one child and live with Ming’s parents. Before his son attended a preschool, his paternal grandmother looked after him.

#### **Why preschools?**

Ming was not concerned about cognitive learning such as Chinese and English language or arithmetic because he and his wife could teach their son at home. His wish was that his son would be happy and enjoy his preschool life. Ming felt that as his son was an only child he was spoilt by his parents and grandparents. He did not have good manners and was not independent. Ming expected preschool education would train him to become independent and to have good manners. His main aim for preschool education was to help his son to work with other people and learn good

behaviour and manners.

Ming did not think that parents should spend lots of time and money on children's English language learning. However, his wife worked in an international company and many of her colleagues had studied in the USA or the UK. From her perspective, their working ability might not be good but they had good competence in English language. Hence they had more opportunities in their careers. Ming and his wife did not think it necessary to send their son to a bilingual or whole English school but they planned to send him to study in a foreign country in the future.

#### Criteria for choosing a preschool

When I met him to give him his diary in May 2005, Ming appeared to have strong interests in his son's education and believed a high "quality" preschool would benefit his son. He put lots of effort into selecting an appropriate preschool and had already visited seven preschools. However, three months later when the first interview was conducted, the first sentence that Ming said was:

*"I used to pay attention to selecting a preschool but I do not think it was necessary. They were no big differences between each school."*

He mentioned that the space of each preschool might be different but it was not important. He thought that choosing a preschool using a bilingual approach or using a traditional approach depended on the financial situation of a family. He did not think a bilingual preschool ensured the future success of a child. He said that he only wanted his son to play in a preschool and meet other children. For Ming, that his son



settled at preschool was more important than any other criteria.

His son had been to preschool for few days but by the time of the first interview, he had stopped going because he could not adapt to a new experience. He did not like having to have a school meal and it being a place where he would sleep. His grandmother had played important role in stopping him attending. Ming's mother went to the preschool to observe her grandson everyday and worried about his difficulty of adapting to the preschool life. She thought that he was only three years old and he was too young to attend a preschool. Even though Ming did not want to stop sending his son to the preschool, it is a part of Chinese culture that Ming had to consider his mother's feelings and she wanted Ming's son to stop going.

Ming visited seven preschools before choosing a preschool for his son but he did not state clearly what his criteria were for choosing a preschool. But from his interview statement it would appear that he had a personal preference about preschool teachers. He mentioned that for some preschools, he only needed to spend about twenty minutes observing before knowing that he did not like it. For example, Lan School and Bao School had teachers with a Taiwanese accent or some were Indigenous people<sup>25</sup>. Although they seemed quite enthusiastic he could not accept these teachers. He said "*I preferred a teacher who has the style of an office lady*". The buildings and facilities of these two preschools were old and did not have modern facilities. He did not want to send his son to these two schools.

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<sup>25</sup> This refers to important markers of social difference and discrimination in Taiwan, based on the different populations that have moved to the island at different times. Accent can be an important source of cultural capital-or lack of it. For many Taiwanese, the original indigenous inhabitants are treated as socially and culturally inferior.

Yu School had a nice physical environment and facilities but he did not consider it because he thought that most children in Yu School came from a low social and economic background.

Ming also visited Ho School which is a famous bilingual preschool in Taiwan. From his perspective, the preschool was a commercial venture, which only focused on English language learning and made stressful circumstances out of peer competition. It marketed itself with the message that children would get behind, especially in their English ability, if they did not attend this school. Ming did not agree with that so he did not choose it. He said:

*“They said that it won’t be too late to learn English when he is in a primary school. I don’t agree that a child speaking some English sentences in preschool stage could definitely have better English ability in the future.”*

Yin School had big outdoor space and he felt that the head-teacher had a good knowledge of preschool education. However, there were too many students in the school and the head-teacher was very old. The buildings were also old. He did not like it.

Ming heard that the head-teacher in Jo School was good. The school was new and teaching facilities were modern and imported from Europe. When he visited the school, the staff explained their teaching materials to him. It was a whole English language school. Ming did not like that but the school planned to use a bilingual approach. However, the school had an An-Chin-Ban<sup>26</sup> and accepted primary school

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<sup>26</sup> Primary school students come to the setting after school because primary school finishes lessons earlier than their parents finish their work. Children came to the An-Chin-Ban to write their home work and learn English, and wait for their parents to pick them up.

students in the afternoon. Preschool children had to share the space with primary school students which Ming thought was not appropriate for young children. As it had good facilities, it was his second choice.

Ming chose Jia School because it had an outdoor playground and a good reputation. The school used the Montessori approach and mixed children of different age, which provided opportunities for interaction between children of different age groups. He agreed with the head-teacher's idea that children had choices with an appropriate scope for their learning. Ming appreciated an activity called "Spirit Spa". When the children arrived in the morning they had a period of quiet time to reflect and to appreciate their families. He also found that the head-teacher had read many books to improve her professional knowledge. He believed the quality of a head-teacher was important as it might affect the quality of teachers and also the preschool.

Ming spent a lot of time visiting different preschools near his house and finally chose Jia School (see Figure 4.9) for his son. However, his son only attended this preschool for few days and then stopped going to preschool. Ming's son could not adapt to the new environment. After this experience, Ming felt that parents' criteria of a preschool were not important, if the child could not adapt the environment.

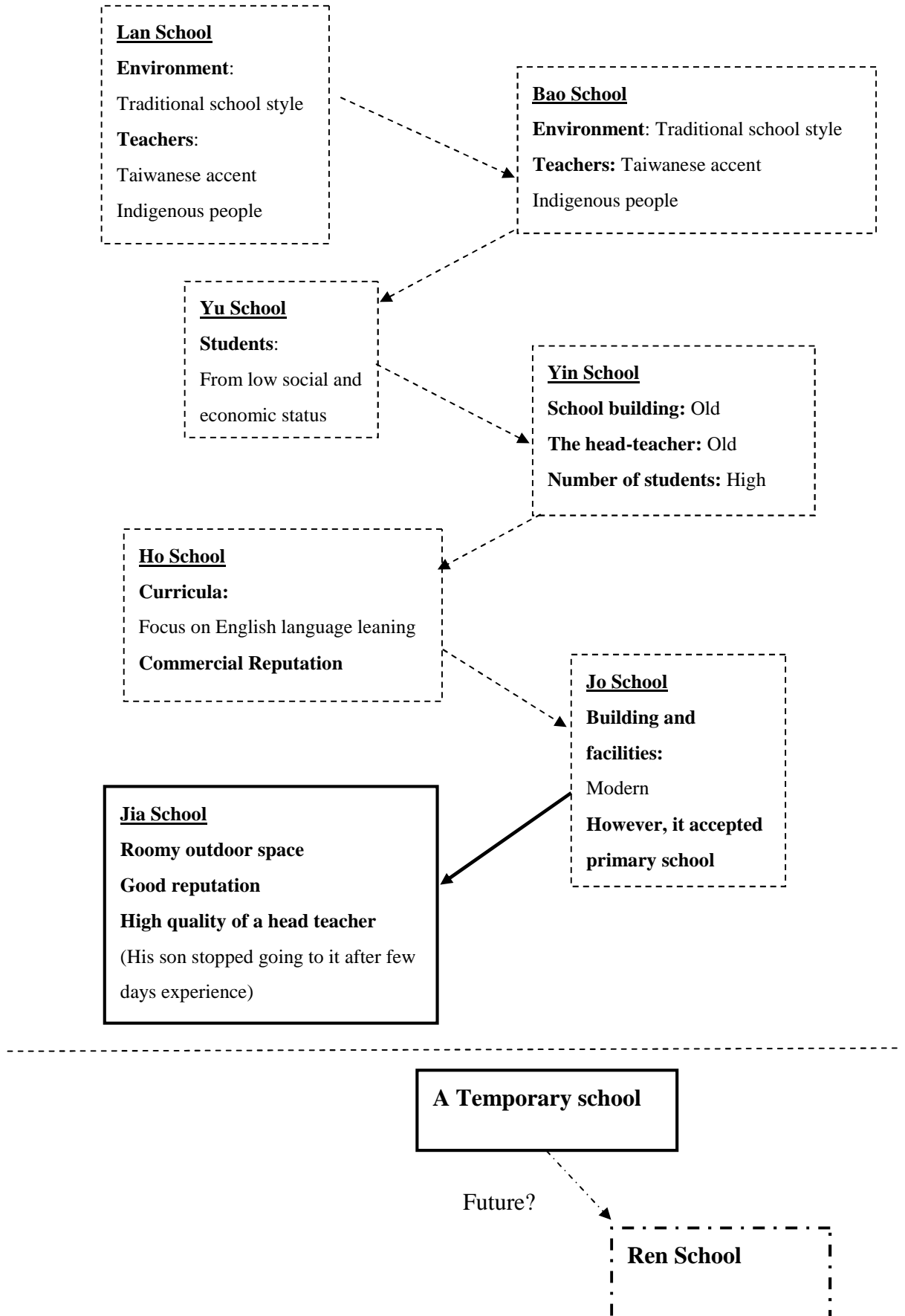


Figure 4.9: Ming's decision making process

### Influences on his choice

Ming did not use his social networks to get information about preschools because, from his perspective, his relatives did not pay attention to children's education. The preschools that he visited were close to his house. But his mother's opinion affected his decision to stop him sending his son to the preschool.

Preschool policies did not appear to have any influence on his choice. He knew about the educational voucher scheme but he did not know about registration for the schools he visited. When asked about the national evaluation of preschools, he mentioned that he distrusted the results of national evaluations. He found that most preschools near his house had been evaluated "excellent" for the national evaluation of preschools if they had been running for many years. He said

*"I doubt the judgments of national evaluation. It seems that every school which has been run for many years will have 'excellent' result of the national evaluation. If a school has been running for many years, the head-teacher may know the evaluators. That's what I presume."*

### Satisfaction

After nine months, by the time of the second interview, his son was attending another preschool temporarily because their house was being renovated and there was a lot of loud noise. It was a preschool that he did not mention in the first interview. His son was now three and half years old. From Ming's perspective, he was now mature enough to adapt to preschool life. Ming decided to send him to the preschool which was closest to his house and convenient for the grandparents to pick him up. It had

cheap tuition fees.

Ming's son would stay at this preschool for only a couple of months because Ming would move him to another private kindergarten which also had primary education. Ming said "*No public primary school near my house is good*". The area they lived in had a big market. Most parents in the public primary school worked there and Ming did not like it. He wanted to send his son to a private primary school called Ren School but the school only accepted new students from four years old. If children wanted to attend, they had to start it from the age of four. Ming believed the parents in Ren School would be more concerned about children's education and they came from a higher social status than the parents in the public primary school. As a result, Ming had to send his son to a preschool temporarily for a couple of months before he could be accepted by Ren School. Whilst he acknowledged this school was cheap he said it did not provide any education. Children only played and did painting or crafts. The space was small and the teachers' ages were quite old. He thought they would not be qualified in early childhood education. However, it was an opportunity for his son to get used to preschool life. Ming found his son enjoyed being there and interacting with other children although Ming was not satisfied with the quality of the preschool. He believed that after his son had the experience of this temporary preschool, he would like Ren School more because it had a big space and good quality facilities.

When Ming was asked why he did not consider Ren School originally, he said it was because it accepted children with learning difficulties. However, he discovered that all the children with learning difficulties were in one class away from the other children so he decided to send his son there. He thought it provided opportunities for his son to meet children with special needs and it would help him to face people with special

needs without fear in the future. Ming mentioned that he knew everyone should be treated equally but his parents discriminated against children with special needs. He had to persuade his parents to accept his choice.

At the end of the second interview, Ming pointed out that choosing a school depended on what parents wanted for their children. Parents needed to consider their financial situation and had to choose an affordable school. He found the quality of individual schools did not differ as they had to survive market competition. For Ming, social status and the cultural capital of his neighbourhood influenced his decision making.

### Summary

Ming only had one child in his family and lived with his parents. On one hand, he was worried that his son would be spoiled at home and wanted to send him to a school. On the other hand, he could not neglect the grandmothers' feeling. Ming had a preference of a preschool by the time of the first interview. After nine months, he had different concerns about the future education of his son. He was concerned about social status and cultural capital of teachers, pupils and the neighbourhood and these influenced the preschools he considered and affected his choice.

#### **4.3.2 Parent Ping**

Ping and her husband both have Bachelor's degrees and are on the IT staff in different companies. She works in a bank and her husband works in a security company. They are a nuclear family with one child but live in the same area as her parents. Before her daughter attended a preschool, Ping's mother looked after her. By the time of the first interview, her daughter still lived with her maternal grandparents and Ping went to her parents' house after finishing work every day. The family income is about two million and seven hundred thousand Taiwanese dollars (about forty-five thousand pounds) per year.

##### Why preschools?

From Ping's interview, it was difficult to understand what her criteria for selecting a preschool were. Ping sent her daughter to a preschool because her daughter wanted to go to preschool and Ping's mother did not feel well enough to look after her. She did not offer any expectations about sending her daughter to a preschool. Her daughter had attended Sia School for only two weeks by the time of the first interview but had already stopped going. She had been happy at the beginning but she refused to go to Sia School or any school after two weeks. Ping and Ping's mother did not understand the reasons. They asked the little girl and also talked to her teachers but they still did not understand why.

##### Criteria for choosing a preschool

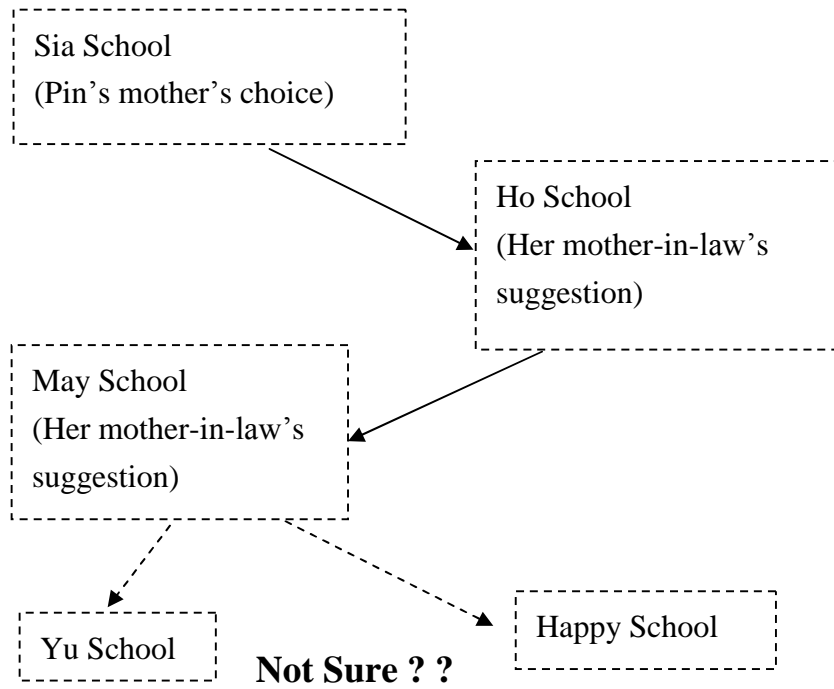
Ping did not have strong opinions about her daughter's preschool education. Sia



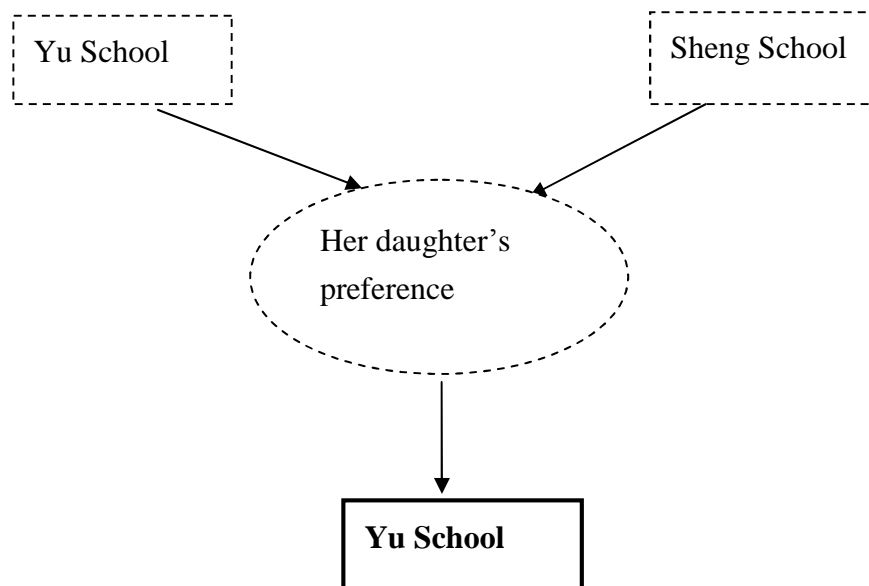
School was chosen by Ping's mother. After her daughter refused to attend, she accepted her mother-in-law's suggestion to visit Ho School and May School. In addition, Ping thought about Happy School and Yu Kindergarten but she had not visited these two schools by the time of the first interview (see Figure 4.10).

Sia School was not chosen by Ping. It was her mother's decision because it was close to her parents' house. Ping and her husband did not like it at the beginning because it was small and close to a market. There were many flies in the school although her daughter was happy there initially. The curriculum was diverse. The head teacher and staff were enthusiastic. For of these reasons, Ping agreed to send her daughter to Sia School. Her daughter was only three years old at that time but she preferred to join the five-year-old class. They guessed it was due to the fact that young children (three-year-old children) did not like to share toys with her but in the five-year-old class, the older children were happy to share toys and food with her. Her parents and grandparents could not understand why she rejected going to the school after two weeks especially as she mentioned that she missed her teacher and the head-teacher. Ping tried to persuade her to go to preschool but her answer was "No". Ping still wanted to send her daughter to a school because her mother could not look after her. She assumed if she attended the same preschool as her cousin, she might like to go to preschool. Therefore, Ping accepted her mother-in-law's suggestion to visit Ho School and May School.

**By the time of the first interview**



**By the time of the second interview**



**Figure 4.10: Pin's decision making process**

When Ping visited Ho School, Ping's niece was studying there. Ping liked Ho School because it had a big school building and nice facilities. It focused on English language learning. She believed her daughter might make good progress in reading and writing English. Ping assumed that Ho School had a structured curriculum and strict timetable. However, she felt that the children might be under pressure. For Ping, her daughter having opportunities to meet with other children and enjoying her school life were more important than learning English. She preferred the curriculum in Sia School. Her daughter could have flexible choices in Sia School. For example, her daughter was allowed to stay in the five-year-old class or not eat her lunch if she did not want to in Sia School. She worried that her daughter would not be allowed to choose what she liked to do at Ho School and her daughter would not accept it. By the time of the first interview, her niece could not adapt to school life either and had refused to attend. Consequently, she rejected Ho School for her daughter.

Her niece moved from Ho School to May School. After visiting May School, Ping did not like it. She mentioned that a teacher was not friendly. The only reason she considered it was because her niece was there and consequently her daughter might agree to attend. She said that her daughter went for a trial session at May School and Ping went with her on the first day. When other children were doing crafts, the teacher did not provide materials for her daughter to join in even though she reminded the teacher several times. In addition, there were some children with special needs in the class, she worried that teachers might pay attention to those children and forget other children. She said "*if my daughter could accept other preschools, I would not choose May School for her*". Her daughter did not want to go to May School so she did not choose it.

After being disappointed about May School, Ping and her husband thought about sending her daughter to Happy School but she had not visited it by the time of the first interview. When asked the reason of considering about it, she said that “*many people recommended it and it focused on English language learning*”. Her response surprised me because her main reason for disliking Ho School was that it focused on English language teaching. There was a contradiction. She explained that was her husband’s idea. She said:

*“My husband had one value that children had to learn English in preschool but it doesn’t matter that children do not learn Chinese Phonetic Symbols. He believed that children would be taught Chinese when they are in a primary school and they use Chinese in everyday life. From his concept, children could learn a new language efficiently if adults provide the environment for them. Moreover, we all agree that English is an international language. If she could learn it well, it would benefit her in the future.”*

As she had not visited Happy School she did not know whether they used a whole English language approach or a bilingual approach. She worried that if the school only used English for teaching, her daughter might not be interested. Happy School was a consideration but she had not decided yet.

Ping also considered Yu School for her daughter because it belonged to a primary school and she wanted her daughter to attend Yu primary school in the future. The reputation of Yu primary school was good but Ping had no idea about Yu School because she had not visited it. She only knew it had a big indoor and outdoor space for children to play in.

Ping did not explain her criteria for choosing a school. After comparing the curricula

of the three schools she visited, she preferred the curricula in Sia School but her daughter did not want to go to any preschool at that time. Therefore, her only real concern was her daughter's attitude. Ping did not want to push her daughter to attend any preschool if she did not want to go. She was still waiting for her daughter to agree to go to preschool, although she had some preferences for preschools.

#### Influences on her choice

Ping took her parents' and parents-in-law's opinions into account when choosing a preschool. She visited three preschools which were recommended by her mother or her mother-in-law. When she talked about Sia School and Happy School, it was obvious that she also considered her husband's opinion. In addition, she also consulted friends but she did not search for information herself. Her only personal preference was Yu kindergarten which she considered because of wanting continuity of primary school education, but she had not visited it by the time of the first interview.

Ping did not pay attention to preschool policies in Taiwan when she looked for a preschool. She lacked knowledge about the early childhood educational voucher scheme and the national evaluation of preschools. She knew Yu kindergarten was registered because the school bag was printed with the official registration number on the top but she did not know the difference between a kindergarten and a nursery. The policies relating to preschools appeared not to have any influence on her judgments of quality.

## Satisfaction

The second interview was conducted nine months after the first interview. By this time her daughter was back to living with her and her husband. She had attended a kindergarten for two months. In the intervening time Ping had continued trying to persuade her daughter to attend preschool because her grandparents could not look after her. Finally, her daughter agreed to go to preschool after the winter holidays (around February 2006). Ping thought about sending her to Yu School or even Sheng School, which was close to their house. When asked why she did not choose Sia School or Happy School, she responded that she had to take her daughter herself every morning so she had to consider the convenience of travelling. Ping had mentioned Yu School in the first interview but not Sheng School.

Sheng School was in the same building as their home. From Ping's observations, the child-teacher interaction was good. Yu School had a school bus and they could send her daughter to her parents' house after lessons finished so both Sheng and Yu School were convenient for Ping. She visited both schools with her daughter and the final decision was made by her daughter who chose Yu School for herself. When asked about her daughter's reason of choosing Yu School, Ping presumed that her daughter did not like the story which the teacher read when they visited Sheng School; on the other hand, Yu School had a large outdoor playground which might be attractive to her daughter.

Her daughter was happy to go to preschool for only one week. After one week, she cried and refused to go. Ping discussed this problem with the teachers and head-teacher at Yu School. They told her it was a common situation and suggested

Ping gave her daughter time to adapt to the new environment. She continued sending her to Yu School although she was worried about her daughter's feelings. When she observed her daughter's interaction with her teachers, she was delighted with teachers' skills of getting her daughter's trust and the encouragement of independence. The teacher was keen to communicate and shared her disciplining skills with Ping which helped to correct her daughter's behaviour and manners.

Ping did not pay much attention on the curricula in Yu School. She believed that it was better to go to preschool and learn something than to stay at home and watch television. Ping was surprised with her daughter's improved cognitive knowledge. For example, her daughter could read English and Chinese textbooks although they did not teach her at home. Ping did not know the teachers' background because she felt it was impolite to ask about it. From her observations she trusted the teachers' capabilities. She appreciated the changes in her daughter. Even her parents, parents-in-law and the cleaner in her house could see the improvement. Ping and her parents regretted that they had not sent her to the preschool earlier.

After her daughter started attending Yu School, Ping mentioned that she had changed her criteria for choosing a preschool. She believed that her daughter's preference was more important than her criteria because she was the one attending the preschool. Ping believed her daughter might have her own preferences, although she did not understand how her daughter made her decisions. From her experience Ping suggested that when choosing a preschool parents should send their child to preschools directly and test the water. She said *"If children can adapt to the school environment and if the teachers had good behaviour, it is a good school"*.

## Summary

Ping was a parent who did not like to push her daughter. She respected her daughter's feelings and attitude although she wanted and needed to send her to a preschool. She believed that children should make their own choices. If parents put effort into selecting a school for their children but ignored children's feeling, they would not find the right school for their children. For Ping, the children's preference would be the most important criterion for choosing a preschool. The preschool would be a good preschool if the children liked it.



#### **4.4 The “Other people know better” parents**

From the earlier three groups of cases, it can be seen that the processes or strategic actions that parents use might be different but they all want to find the best preschool for their children. They visit preschools and compare the differences between schools and balanced risks and benefits in order to choose the one which they believe will be the right preschool for their children. Jeng and Ling were different from other parents. They did not visit any school before making their decisions but accepted other people's suggestion for schools.

##### **4.4.1 Parent Jeng**

Jeng is an operator in a traditional factory and has a senior high school certificate. Her husband is a foreman in a factory and has a junior high school certificate. They have two daughters and live with her husband's sister. Their family income is about six hundred thousand Taiwanese dollars (about ten thousand pounds) per year.

##### **Why preschools?**

By the time of the first interview (September 2005), Jeng's older daughter was two years and ten months old and the younger daughter was only one year and eight months old. Both of them had attended the preschool for a couple of months and they were in the same class. This was because none of her relatives could look after her children and she said she could not afford to have a child minder. In addition, a child minder would only look after and feed their children but could not educate them. Because Jeng wanted to work, she had to send her daughters to a preschool when they

were very young.

### Criteria for choosing a preschool

Jeng did not spend time searching for a preschool for her children. She had a job and hurried to find a preschool for her daughters. She accepted her aunt's suggestion to send her children to Neng School. Her younger daughter was under two years old and it was the preschool which could accept both her two daughters<sup>27</sup> and the fees were affordable. She did not think about other conditions of the preschool. When asked about her criteria for choosing a preschool, she did not have clear or strong opinions. She was only concerned that the preschool was affordable and would accept both her two daughters. School time also needed to match her working time. Convenience and affordable fees were her main criteria for choosing a preschool.

### Influences on her choice

From Jeng's interview statement, making her choice seemed very simple. She needed to find a preschool for her daughters and she accepted her aunt's suggestion as to where to look. She did not collect information or ask advice about the quality of preschools.

Jeng lacked knowledge of preschool policies; thus the policies did not have any influence on her choice. She did not know that children who had reached the age of five and were studying in a legally registered private preschool could be partly

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<sup>27</sup> Her young daughter was under two years old. Many preschools did not accept children under two years old.

subsidized by early childhood educational vouchers. She was not sure whether Neng School had official registration. Her sister-in-law told her that Neng School did not have legal registration. She did not regard it as important. She assumed the school without registration was another school with the same name.

*“I don’t know whether it was legal registered or not. However, my sister saw in a newspaper that Neng School was not a legal registered school. I don’t know whether it was this school. My sister blamed me for sending my children to an illegal school but I thought it could be a different school with the same name. In addition, the head-teacher told me Neng School is a legal registered school.”*

### Satisfaction

She did not pay much attention to the quality of Neng School. When the first interview was conducted, she told me that she was not satisfied with the preschool but it was acceptable. She disliked the curriculum that the preschool offered. She mentioned that the teachers taught English, Chinese letters and arithmetic but she felt the progress was slow. When asked about the teacher’s quality, she said that a teacher with a dependable and sensitive character was more important than having a qualification. She would not like a teacher to be qualified but not friendly. She was delighted with her daughters’ teachers, but did not know about their qualifications. When asked about the environment of the school, she responded that the school was fine. It was bright and clean, and had space for children to play.

After eight months, Jeng was not pleased with her choice. She mentioned that her daughters had become wilful and did not obey her. She was worried about their behaviour and manners. Another disappointment was that she did not agree with the

disciplining strategy of the teachers. The teachers always gave the children sweets or biscuits in order to stop their inappropriate behaviour. Jeng thought that her daughters did not eat meals at home because they had too many sweets and biscuits at school. She did not feel confident or comfortable enough to discuss it with the teachers. She thought that they would not accept her opinions. She was similarly dissatisfied with the curricula. She complained that the teachers had asked children to recite “Syiau Jieng<sup>28</sup>”. She believed it was too difficult for three-year-old children. Her elder daughter could only recite the first articles of “Syiau Jieng” but her younger daughter could not remember any of it. She also felt that her daughters did not make much progress in other subjects. When asked about whether she discussed this with the teachers, she responded “*No, I am afraid that they won’t accept it.*”

These disappointments led her to think about moving her daughters to another school. When her friend saw her daughters’ behaviour, she suggested to Jeng that she should move her daughters to Qing School which might be helpful in correcting their behaviour and manners. Jeng accepted her friend’s suggestion and visited Qing School. She said “*The tuition fee in Qing School was cheap; teachers would not use sweets or biscuits to reward children and the curricula seemed quite diverse*”. However, the school time did not match her needs. She had to work on Saturdays<sup>29</sup> but Qing School did not provide a weekend program. She could not change to Qing School so her daughters remained in Neng School.

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<sup>28</sup> It includes eighteen articles written in classical literary Chinese.

<sup>29</sup> In general, preschool settings do not have lessons on Saturday. Only few schools have this service.

### Summary

Jeng did not have strong opinions about choosing preschools. She did not have many choices because she had to work on Saturday and her family income was low. She had to be concerned about affordable tuition fees. Jeng wanted to send both her daughters to the same preschool but few preschools could accept children under two years old. Under these conditions, Jeng had limited choice. She was not pleased about her choice but she could not change it.

#### **4.4.2 Parent Ling**

Ling is an operator in an industry and her husband is a freelance cartographer working from home. Both of them have two year college certificates. They live with their two children, parents-in-law and two sisters (on her husband's side). Ling and her husband's incomes totalled about one million Taiwanese dollars (around seventeen thousands pounds) per year.

##### Why preschools?

Ling's choice of preschool did not depend on any visits. Before Ling's daughter went to preschool, she was looked after by Ling's mother-in-law. When asked why she sent her daughter to a preschool, Ling said that her daughter was bored staying at home. In addition, her daughter was afraid of unfamiliar people and did not know how to play with new friends. Ling believed attending a preschool might give her daughter opportunities to mix and interact with other children. She hoped her daughter would become lively by going to preschool. She expected preschool education would teach her to have good behaviour and manners, and also cognitive knowledge such as English and Chinese language, arithmetic and natural science. Music, arts and crafts were important for diversity. On the other hand, she also mentioned that she was not concerned about what she learned when she was only three years old, but she had to have academic skills and knowledge for primary school ready by the time she was five years old.

### Criteria for choosing a preschool

Ling's sister-in-law was teaching in a preschool so she did not consider any other preschools but chose that one for her daughter. She did not like the arrangement of the preschool environment. The preschool had moved to a new location before her daughter started attending and its facilities and teaching tools were not well designed and looked quite old. The buildings and surroundings looked bleak. When asked her reason for choosing this school, she said that she knew most of teachers. From her perspective, they were patient and nice. She believed they would treat her daughter well. But she pointed out that the appearance of the preschool would not attract parents. She said:

*“The facilities are old and the school does not look attractive but I think a good interaction between teachers and children is more important than a nice physical environment.”*

### Influences on her choice

She did not visit any preschools before she made her decision. When I asked Ling whether she would have chosen this preschool for her daughter if her sister-in-law was not a teacher in this school, her answer was “No”. She chose this preschool only because her sister-in-law taught there. She believed her daughter would be treated well in the preschool.

Ling did not have clear knowledge about preschool policies so these policies did not influence her choice. For example, she was not aware of the national evaluation of preschools. She had heard about the early childhood educational voucher scheme but

did not know how to apply for it. She did ask her sister-in-law how to apply for the educational voucher but her response was “*I do not know the system*”. Ling felt confused because her sister-in-law told Ling that the school was legally registered but her sister-in-law did not know the voucher scheme. Her sister-in-law was teaching a five-year-old class<sup>30</sup>. Ling queried whether the preschool had legal registration. Ling had questions about the vouchers and the registration of the preschool, but these did not influence her choice.

### Satisfaction

After nine months school experience, Ling could notice her daughter’s improvement in interacting with others. She used to hide herself when she saw unfamiliar people but it had improved. Her expression was clearer than before. On the other hand, Ling felt her daughter had become more naughty and disobedient.

In general, it was difficult to judge whether Ling was satisfied or dissatisfied with her choice. Ling felt fairly happy about what the preschool offered. She mentioned that the school provided hearty meals for children and her daughter told her that she liked the meals at school better than the meals at home. In addition, Ling got a diary from the teachers<sup>31</sup> every week telling about her daughter’s progress in preschool. She thought the teachers were caring about her daughter. Ling did not like to contact the teachers actively. Only once she had tried to understand the teacher’s purpose in asking her daughter to repeat the same homework for more than two months. She did not want to communicate with the teacher at the beginning but her daughter was

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<sup>30</sup> Early childhood educational vouchers were only provided for five-year-old children who attended a legally registered setting.

<sup>31</sup> There were two teachers in her daughter’s class.



frustrated by writing the same homework. After two months, she had talked to the teacher about the problem. The problem was solved. However, she felt from the performance of the children that the quality of the English teaching was not good.

Ling did not have strong opinions about the curriculum but the curriculum involved reciting “Syiau Jieng<sup>32</sup>” which she felt it was too difficult for three-year-old children and might affect children’s confidence in learning; however, she did not discuss this issue with the teachers. She still thought the physical environment needed to be improved. When asked about her satisfaction with the school, she said “*I was fairly satisfied with it*”.

Ling suggested that when choosing a preschool, parents should observe the interaction between teachers and children. A teacher’s teaching style was important. However, she did not visit the preschool before choosing it.

### Summary

From Ling’s statement, good interaction between children and teachers was an important criterion of a “good” preschool. However, she chose the school because her sister-in-law was a teacher in the school and they lived together. She knew most of the teachers in the school and believed her daughter could get a lot of attention from them. On the other hand, she did not like the physical environment of the preschool and would not have chosen the school if her sister-in-law did not teach there. There were contradictions and conflicts in her choice. Her sister-in-law might have had an important influence on her choice although she said that she had made the decision on

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<sup>32</sup> It includes eighteen articles written in classic literary Chinese.

her own.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the processes of parents choosing preschools in Taiwan. These cases show that the influences on the processes and parents' consideration for a preschool are complex. Parents made their choices rationally. They attempted to calculate and balance the benefits and risks of their choices. The process of selecting a preschool is difficult but parents try hard to choose the "best" one for their children. Four groups of parents had different starting points when selecting a preschool. The "*know what I want*" parents used clear ideas and criteria to select a preschool for their children. However, Hui and Shieh had to be concerned about other family members' opinions and find a preschool which met everyone's expectations. The "*know what I want but changed my mind*" parents found that they could not investigate all the issues or problem in preschools before their children started to attend. For example, Chen visited ten preschools before making her choice but she was not satisfied with the opportunities to use the facilities or the children's behaviour in the preschool that she chose. She had considered moving her daughter to the other preschool. Jun found the provision at the preschool was different from her expectations. Siao's daughter could not enjoy the preschool life because the foreign teacher was not patient. Both of them queried their criteria for finding schools for their children. The "*don't know what I want but I will know it when I see it*" parents visited several preschools and compared the qualities of every preschool. However, Ming's mother had not prepared for her grandson to go to preschool and Ming had to persuade her in order to send his son to school. Ping's daughter had rejected preschool by the time of the first interview. Ping subsequently changed her strategy and involved her daughter in the process of

looking for a preschool. For the “*other people know better*” parents, the process of looking for a preschool was not as complex as in the other three groups. They accepted other people’s suggestions but they also wanted to maximize the benefits for their children. Jeng tried to move to another preschool to improve her daughters’ behaviour. Ling was concerned about the school environment but her trust in the teachers swayed her decision.

However, every parent had different expectations. Their family structure, educational background, financial situation and personal experience led them to have different criteria for choosing a preschool. In addition, Chinese culture and the environment in Taiwan affected parents’ preferences for preschools, in which there were some differences from the expectations of preschool professionals or experts. The next chapter will discuss parents’ criteria for choosing a preschool by using cross-case analysis, the influences and their satisfaction with their choices. It will provide a general understanding of parental choice in a Taiwanese context.

## **Chapter Five: Cross-case Analysis**

### **5.0 Introduction**

In the previous chapter the analysis focused on individual experiences in order to understand the causes, considerations or influences behind individual choices in the Taiwanese context. This chapter is structured as a comparison and synthesis of eighteen parents' concepts in order to elucidate key issues. It uses the framework of quality developed from the universal definition (Espinosa, 2002; Phillipsen et al., 1997; Cryer, 1999) to address the central research questions. These are:

- 1) What are the parents' expectations of pre-school education?
- 2) What are their criteria for choosing a preschool?
- 3) What are the influences on the choice process?
- 4) To what extent, are they satisfied with their choice and have their expectations been met?

### **5.1 What are the parents' expectations of pre-school education?**

Compulsory education in Taiwan starts at the age of six. However, most parents decide to send their children to a preschool from the age of three (Lin, 2002). Children, therefore, have three years of pre-school education for which parents have to pay the tuition fees. It has been found that parents have some specific needs and reasons for sending their children to preschool. From an analysis of data collected here, the reasons parents send their children to a preschool can be grouped into three themes: child care, social development and academic learning.

### **5.1.1 Child care**

Parents Jun, Hui, Ping and Jeng needed to send their children to preschool because there was a shortage of helpers to look after their children. Jun said she could not manage to look after her two children because their ages were very close. Therefore, after the second child was born, she sent her eldest son to a preschool. Both Ping and Hui were working and their mothers used to look after their daughters. However, their mothers developed poor health and were unable to look after their children. They felt they had to send their daughters to preschool. Jeng used to look after her two daughters by herself but she wanted to work. She could not afford a child minder to look after her daughters. It was cheaper for her to send her two daughters to a preschool. For these parents, one of the most important reasons for sending their children to a preschool was that the child would be looked after while they themselves were otherwise occupied.

### **5.1.2 Personal social development**

Another reason for attending preschool was that they expected their children to develop their personal social skills. Dowling (2000:18) points out 'Being good with people has always been recognised as strength in people's work and personal lives'. Dowling suggests that the first six or seven years of development are critical for the development of social skills. By the age of four a child should easily be able to deal with several peer relationships. If a child fails during this time to learn to relate to other children, this can lead to great unhappiness. Dowling also believes that if a child does not have the support of friends in a school, it may lead the child to refuse to

attend school and also influence his or her academic achievements. Therefore, an appropriate preschool will provide children, maybe for the first time, with the opportunities to argue, cooperate and socialize with their peers. Many parents in this research had similar concerns to Dowling's concept. Parents expected that pre-school life could improve their children's personal social development.

In Taiwan it is very common for parents to have only one or two children in their family. As a consequence, children do not have many opportunities to interact with other children or adults. Hsu, Ling and Chong found their children did not feel comfortable playing with other children. Lacking opportunities to interact with other children meant that they did not develop what they consider to be appropriate manners and behaviour. For example, Fang, Chen and Hsu felt their children were spoiled and wilful at home because they lacked opportunities to cooperate and share with others. In addition some parents, such as Ye and Ping, were too busy with their work and consequently did not have the time or energy to help their children to expand their social experience. Thirteen parents wanted to send their children to preschool so that their children could meet other children in order to develop their social skills.

Jose et al. (2000), point out that Chinese parents are more likely to encourage their children to view themselves as fully integrated parts of the whole family, community and society. The analysis in this research found that many parents (except Jeng) sent their children to preschool because they wanted their children to cooperate with other children and to learn behaviour that is acceptable to their peers. They believe children have to know the "rules of living" which were defined as; good manners, and behaviour and habits that people can generally accept when they are young in order to

mix and work with others. This would benefit the children's future development. Curtis (1998) mentions that children may discover soon that the social behaviour acceptable within a preschool may be very different from that accepted within the family. Children may change their attitudes and learn to cooperate with other children and express their feelings to others in order to prepare to integrate into Taiwanese society. Therefore, parents believe that sending children to schools could benefit their children's social development because they had the opportunities to socialize and play with their peers.

Moreover, parents knew the importance of socialization for their children but they did not feel confident in helping their children to develop this ability themselves. For instance, Ming said that he did not know how to guide his child's behaviour. Gao worried that she did not know how to help her child to mix with others. Both of them knew their weaknesses in bringing up their children and they did not want them to have any social disadvantages. In their opinions, pre-school life gave children opportunities to play with other children and pre-school teachers have a lot of experience in guiding children's manners and social skills.

*I hope she can have opportunities to get in touch with children because she is alone and doesn't know how to mix with others .... I don't know how to teach her to play with other children so I hope teachers can use their skills to teach my daughter and help her to interact with other children. I know that the weakness of an only child is that she doesn't know how to share with others because everyone in the family always supports her and gives her what she wants. I don't want her to have this negative behaviour when she grows up (Gao in the first interview).*

In addition, most parents knew it was important that children develop the skills that

enable them to become less physically dependent upon adults before they go to a primary school. They could feed and dress themselves and control their toilet habits. However, in some cases, they were in an extended family and lived with grandparents. Parents, for example Ming, Weng and Sing, had different standards of discipline and training for their children from their husband or their parents. Therefore, acquiring physical and functional independence was one of the parents' expectations for pre-school education.

Healthy emotional development is very important for a successful life. Helping children to explore and share their feelings not only enables them better to understand themselves and others but also to help other people to understand their feelings. Curtis (1998) suggests that pre-school teachers should attempt to develop children's ability to recognise, accept and talk about feelings such as happiness, sadness, anger and surprise. However, young children may not have the appropriate language and cognitive understanding to make sense of the experiences given to them, or to identify and describe their feelings and emotions. In this research, Ming and Siao found that their children have difficulties in describing their feelings and they worried about their child's emotional development. They believe that teachers have the experience to teach children to cope with unreasonable anger. Therefore, they expected pre-school education to improve children's personal, social and emotional development in order to compensate for the weaknesses in family education.

Only Jeng did not mention the importance of personal social development. However, during the second interview she expressed disappointment about her daughters' wilful attitude and behaviour. She wanted to move her daughters to another preschool. Parents expectations were that pre-school education could help their children to



develop their social skills and manners and thus adapt to a collective life. For many parents in this research, the main reason for sending their child to a preschool was to improve personal social development.

### Satisfaction

However, it is a big step for any child to move from home or one care-giver to a group setting and there are considerable challenges and emotions involved for parents and children during the early days of separation (Dowling, 2000). Many parents in this research said that their children cried every morning when they left their house to go to preschool, but the situation improved after a few weeks. Some children started to enjoy their school life after a few weeks' experience. As Weng said "*He is very happy everyday now. He looks very happy to go to school*".

Ling, Gao, Sing, Chong and May found the interactions between their children and other people had improved after schooling. This matched their expectations of pre-school education. Similarly, Fang thought that her daughter's social development had improved because she felt her daughter had become more independent. Jian was satisfied that her daughter had become lively and gregarious. Ping was surprised by the changes in her daughter's manner. She now greeted grandparents sweetly. Even their cleaner noted her changes. The cleaner told Ping "*She is so good and sweet now. She greets me everyday. She used to ignore me before*". Ping and her parents (both on her side and her husband's side) were gratified by Ping's choice.

Hsu and Jun pointed out their daughter's improvement. Hsu said "*She has good sleeping and eating habits, and she brushes her teeth regularly*". Weng and Jun found

their sons could take responsibility for small tasks such as tidying up toys or laying the table. Moreover, Hui, Gao and Jeng found their children could feed themselves and accept different kinds of food. In addition, Weng, Ping and Jian mentioned that children were expected to clean their classrooms in the schools. They believed this was good training for their children. Weng said "*My son can help me to wipe a table. I am so happy to see that*".

Hsu, Siao and Sing mentioned that their children's powers of expression had improved, with which they were satisfied. Hsu felt she would have a better understanding of what her daughter told her after she had been to preschool. Siao mentioned that her daughter could express her feelings clearly when someone annoyed her. Sing realized her son's improvement after talking to her teacher. The teacher told her that her son liked to express himself and talked to the teacher. Sing was very pleased to hear about this improvement.

### Dissatisfaction

In Chinese culture, children are encouraged to obey their parents and respect senior people. A well-behaved child is expected "to do as you are told" and "to be docile and obedient" (Yunus, 2005). Parents in Taiwan are concerned about discipline and expect their children to be obedient. However, the birth rate has declined in recent years and most families have only one or two children at home. Many children are spoiled both by parents and grandparents. Therefore, for some parents, one aim of sending their children to preschool was to improve their behaviour, which included becoming independent and obeying an adult's orders. If a preschool could improve children's behaviour, it was a good preschool. However, children becoming more

independent could lead, sometimes, to them having their own opinions. They might not follow all the expectations of their parents. This result caused parents to feel disappointed with their children's attitudes. Ling and Chen mentioned the changes in their children's behaviour after attending preschool. Ling felt her daughter became naughty and disobeyed her requests. Similarly, Chen and her husband found their daughter defied their wishes and shouted at them, which they found difficult to tolerate. Chong and Jun mentioned that, according to the teachers, their children obeyed teacher's requests and behaved well in the preschool. However, their behaviour at home did not improve and they did not understand why their children behaved differently at home. Jeng did not see the importance of children's personal social development when she sent her daughters to preschool, but she became frustrated with her daughters' behaviour. She did not say her daughter's behaviour became worse after attending the school; but her poor behaviour had certainly not been improved. Jeng concluded that the teachers' inappropriate disciplining methods led to her daughters' poor behaviour.

Parents preferred a teacher with good discipline, for example Hsu and Chen. Also this research shows that children's obedient behaviour helps to create a good impression of a preschool for parents, as in the case of Ping. However, the evidence from Western research is that children from authoritarian, controlling and restrictive child-rearing practices have poor school achievement (Yunus, 2005). This is different from the values of Chinese culture and some cases in this research.

### **5.1.3 Academic learning**

In Taiwan, it is common for grandparents to take responsibility for looking after their

grandchildren before they enter school. Nine children in this research were looked after by their grandparents before attending a preschool. However, grandparents did not have the energy to teach or play with young children. Parents were worried about their children's behaviour and cognitive development. They felt their children were too bored by staying at home and wasted their time in watching television with their grandparents. They felt they needed to learn something useful. Their worries led them to send their children to school before reaching the age of compulsory education. In addition, parents wished their children to succeed from the beginning. They would expect pre-school teachers to teach their children reading and writing, as also noted by Chen (1998). A good preschool could provide various activities and teaching materials which could not be provided by an average family. Jun, Hsu, Ling, Ming, Chen, Sing, Siao, Shieh and Jeng believed that in a preschool children could learn basic cognitive knowledge, including literacy, numeric and other subjects, as well as self- management.

Children are expected to have high academic achievements in Taiwan (Hou, 2002; Wu and Qi, 2004). Parents were worried that their children would fall behind their peers if they did not have a pre-school education. Some parents (such as Siao, Ling and Jian) assumed that primary school teachers would not spend much time teaching Chinese phonetic symbols or arithmetic which they would expect to have been covered in preschool. According to these parents, therefore, pre-school education had to cover basic academic skills such as simple reading, writing and calculating skills. In addition, thirteen parents in this research expected their children to learn English in preschool. Gao, Sing and Shieh worried that their children would lag behind in English learning if pre-school education did not have English language learning. Jun and Hsu believed that the pre-school age was the critical period in learning language.

Jun, Chen and Jian believed that their children needed to have English competence to be competitive in the future.

However, Hsu, Ling and Jian had different expectations for pre-school education, depending on their children's ages. When their children were only three years old they expected pre-school education to improve their children's social development. When the child was four or five years old they expected pre-school education to enhance their basic academic skills such as reading, writing and calculating because they will enter compulsory education when they reach six years old.

One interesting finding was that, although parents had similar reasons for sending children to preschool, i.e. they wanted their children to learn academic skills, how they reached this decision differed. Most of the parents in this research were mothers (except Ming). When asked why they sent their child to a pre-school, the parents' answers differed depending on who had looked after their child. When the maternal grandparents looked after their children (for instance, Chen and Weng), the reason they gave for sending the child to preschool was that grandparents were busy with housework so they did not have time or energy to devote to the young children's learning. On the other hand, if the paternal grandparents looked after their children (for instance Sing and Shieh), the reason was that they did not agree with the caring or teaching style. They said that grandparents did not have appropriate knowledge to educate and raise young children. Therefore, they decided to send their children to preschool before compulsory education.

### Satisfaction

When parents talked about children's improvement in academic skills, many parents were pleased with their children's improvement in English language skills. Hsu, Weng, Siao Ping, and Chen were surprised by their children's improvement. Siao, Ping and Chen found their children could recognize some English vocabulary. Hsu and Weng's children could sing English songs. Ping and Sing were pleased with their children's improvement in recognizing Chinese vocabulary.

### Dissatisfaction

Siao expectations of pre-school education changed. When she chose a preschool for her daughter, she was only concerned about her daughter's social development. She chose a whole English language school because it had a nice environment. However, she worried about her daughter's ability in Chinese literacy after she compared her nephews' academic achievement in primary schools. Siao, herself, had only had six months experience of pre-school education so she was behind the other students in primary school and did not achieve well. Therefore, she worried that if her daughter had poor Chinese literacy achievement, she might lag behind in primary school. Sing's husband was disappointed with her son's writing and calculating capabilities. He compared his son's academic skills with his friends' children. He thought pre-school teachers should focus more on academic teaching, although Sing was delighted with her son's improvement in academic skills.

Most parents were generally pleased with their children's progress in academic learning. Even though Chen, Ling, Chong, Jun and Jeng were not satisfied with their

children's behaviour at home, they still had different levels of satisfaction with their children's overall development. Chen was delighted with her daughter's improvement in English language skills; Ling and Chong were pleased with their children's social development. Jun pointed out her son's improvement in cooperating with Jun. Only Jeng did not clarify her daughters' changes. Generally, most children's changes met parents' expectation for pre-school education, except Siao and Jeng.

## **5.2 What are the parents' criteria for choosing a preschool and are they satisfied with their choice?**

This section will discuss parents' criteria for choosing a preschool. Parents' rationales for choosing a preschool may come from their perceptions of pre-school quality and this in turn may influence the facilities provided by pre-schools in Taiwan. Coding the interview data showed parents' criteria for choosing a school included distance, physical environment, teachers' qualities, pre-school curricula and the quality of school meals (see Table 5.1). The following paragraphs will discuss parents' criteria for choosing a preschool.

Table 5.1: Parental criteria for choosing preschools and the dominant criterion in making decisions

	Distance	Physical					Teachers			Meals	Curriculum			The dominant criterion in decision making
		Clean	Safety	Space	Facility	Ratios	Characteristics	Qualification	Ages		Children's enjoyment	Academic learning	Strict plan	
Jun	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*		*	*	Foreign teachers
Ye	*	*			*	*		*			*	(*)		Convenience
Hsu	*	*		*	*		*					*		Distance (child having enough sleep)
Ling			*		*	*	*		*	*		*		Familiar with teachers
Ming	*						*							High quality of a head-teacher
Hui	*	*		*								*		Trust the preschool reputation
Gao	*	*		*	*	*	*					*	*	Trust the preschool reputation
Chen		*	*		*	*	*			*		*		Teacher-child ratios
Wen	*			*			*		*		*			Familiar with the preschool and
Siao		*	*		*	*	*					*		Teacher-child ratios
Ping	*		*		*							*		Child's preference
Sing	*	*		*	*	*	*					*		Familiar with the preschool and
Chon	*	*			*	*	*	*	*		*	(*)		Teacher-child interaction
Shieh		*		*	*	*	*					*		Space
May			*	*			*				*			Space
Jeng		*					*					*		Convenience
Fang		*	*			*	*				*			Teacher-child interaction
Jian		*	*	*		*		*		*		*		Trust the school reputation



### **5.2.1 Distance**

Distance was the first consideration for many parents in this research when they chose a preschool. However, when we looked at their interview statements in detail we noticed that the issue of distance was seen from different perspectives. Some parents considered distance in terms of their own convenience. Others considered their children's needs.

#### Convenience for parents

Ming, Weng, Sing, Hui, and Ping chose preschools which were close to their parent's house because they needed grandparents to pick up their child and look after them until they returned from work. Parents also had to consider grandparents' convenience.

#### Concerning about children's needs

For Weng, choosing a school next to her parents' house was not only convenient for her but also made it easier for her son to adapt himself to the preschool. He was familiar with the preschool environment because he used to play in their playground. Jun only considered preschools which were near her house. She mentioned it was convenient for her to pick up her son or sometimes to observe her son in the preschool. Jun was also concerned about her son's safety in travelling to and from preschool. Ye, Gao and Chong had a similar worry. They thought a long journey to preschool was not suitable or safe for young children. They wanted their children to go to a school

which was easily accessible and did not involve long and potentially dangerous journeys.

*I don't want my daughter to take a school bus because it needs to pick up other children. It takes at least 40 minutes. It is too much for young children. In addition, I ride a motorcycle. If I pick up my daughter by my own, it could be dangerous for us when it is raining. So I prefer a school which is close to my house (Gao in the first interview).*

In addition, the sleep factor for Hsu's daughter affected Hsu's choice. Hsu also wanted her child to go to a bilingual preschool. However, the school was far from their house. She was concerned that her daughter would get too tired; she therefore chose a school which did not use a bilingual approach but was close to her house. She said "*I chose Chang School because I hoped she would have a normal amount of sleep and be healthier*". Hsu took into account benefits and risks in making an appropriate choice. These four parents also mentioned distance as a criterion in choice of school but they were considering their children's needs rather than adults' convenience. For Ye and Hsu, the "distance" was the dominant criterion in making their decisions about preschools.

### **5.2.2 Physical environment**

Marsh (1994) found that the physical environment gives parent the first impression when they visit a preschool. It helps us understand why many parents mentioned the physical environment of preschools in this study when they talked about their impressions of a preschool. We could see from their interview statements that their first impressions of the physical environment influenced their desire to ask for further

information about the preschools, such as curriculum or teaching approach and, of course, this affected their decision. If the physical environment was not attractive, they might only have a short conversation with staff and leave the preschool quickly. On the other hand, if the physical environment of a preschool attracted parents, they added this preschool into their possible choices.

*Ri School has a big and professional ball-pool. That's very good. The toilets are very colourful and beautiful, and there are glass beads on the floor. A big wall is designed with colourful rocks for climbing. In addition, there is a big eurhythmics classroom and LCD computers. At that time, I was considering this school and the other one - Choc. During that time, I also visited one school but the school was rebuilt in an old flat. You can tell they had rebuilt the house from the use of different materials for the house. The floor was uneven and the house was not bright (**Jun in the first interview**).*

Parents would visit different preschools in order to make a clear comparison between each pre-school environment. They felt confident in expressing their opinions of the pre-school environment and the impression it made strongly influenced their choice. According to their responses, the environmental factors they considered included cleanliness, safety and security, amount of space, facilities and child-teacher ratios.

#### A clean and hygienic environment

In interviews, thirteen parents stated that a clean environment was an important criterion for selection of a preschool. When parents visited a school, they checked classrooms, toilets, kitchen and playing facilities to make sure the hygiene of the schools was to a high standard. Jun asked for very detailed information to make sure her child had a clean environment for learning and playing. Chen put a clean

environment as her first priority in choosing a preschool. Hui changed her mind to choose Ho School for her daughter because it was clean; although she preferred the curriculum and outdoor space in Sing School. The environment in Sing School was not clean. The parents were concerned about a clean environment because it was the first environment in which children met with many other children. They had not yet adequately built up their resistance to illness and infection. Siao said *"If a school's physical environment is not clean, children might catch an infection easily, which might also influence their learning progress"*.

#### Safety and security

Curtis (1998) states that a preschool must be both physically and psychologically safe and secure for children to move around freely. Some parents in this research agreed. Eight of them were concerned about a safe and secure environment when they chose a preschool. Jian mentioned that *"Providing a safe environment for children is more important than the quality of curricula"*. Jun and Chen said that they did not consider some preschools because they felt their children were not safe playing or studying in those preschools. For example, Jun talked about one preschool with an uneven floor which was dangerous for children to run on. Chen did not like Ho School because the teachers' desks had sharp edges and corners. Siao did not consider a preschool which was next to her house because the preschool was surrounded by a wall covered with plastic board on the top to make it an airtight space. She felt it would be very dangerous if there was a fire.

Parents also worried about the security of a preschool environment. They were concerned about how difficult or easy it was for strangers to get in. They checked on

the entrance and the security fences when they visited preschools. Ling, Ping and May mentioned that they had worried that strangers might enter the school easily. However, when they spoke to the staff they were reassured by what they were told and decided to send their children to the preschool.

### Sufficient space

Having an ample space for children to play was an important criterion for more than half of parents in this research particularly because space in the home environment is limited for many children. Shieh and May believed that young children need to have enough space to let them play and run in order to develop their motor skills. Therefore, they chose preschools which had a large open space. Both of them chose a school with a big outdoor playground and a natural environment with trees and garden. They believed having a natural and spacious environment was more important to their children than other criteria.

Curtis (1998) declares that space is a basic need for all young children. Taiwan is a crowded country with many high-rise flats and little outdoor play space for young children. For children living in Taipei (the capital), it is particularly important to have space to move and play freely in preschool but it is difficult for a preschool in Taipei to have a large space, especially to have an outdoor playground. Therefore, some parents, such as Gao, tried to find a preschool which at least had some space for children to move their body and do exercise. Hui chose the preschool with an ample indoor space but was worried it did not have outdoor space. This lack of outdoor space is probably true of many preschools elsewhere in Taiwan. Curtis (1998) is worried that it is becoming increasingly difficult to provide space to meet every

child's needs for mobility and exercise in a school. Four-year-old children are at the stage of development where they need many opportunities for large motor movements. Sitting at a table for long periods of time is both emotionally and physically undesirable for them. Many parents in this research had similar worries to those of Curtis.

Because of the difficulty of having an ample outdoor space for a preschool in Taiwan, the regulations for registering a nursery state that outdoor space can be totally replaced by indoor space. Therefore, parents might have to choose a preschool which did not have outdoor space. Consequently, some parents chose preschools which arranged outdoor activities for their children. For example, Siao chose a preschool without an outdoor space but she was pleased that the preschool arranged outdoor activities every week for children; for example, visiting a zoo or a park. Chong and Jun chose preschools which were near public playgrounds. When Chong and Jun visited the preschool the staff told them that teachers would frequently take the children to play in the public playgrounds. However, Jun felt disappointment after her son had been to Choc School because she found that the children did not have many opportunities to play in the public playgrounds.

### Facilities

Preschools with a variety of well designed facilities impressed parents. If the facilities in a preschool were not attractive for parents, that preschool would not be considered, for example, Ming and Chen. Jun, Chen, Ping and Shieh commented that they were impressed by the facilities in the preschools which they visited, suggesting that the quality of the schools' facilities were an important factor in parental choice. Chen and

Jun's case in the previous chapter could explain the reason why many preschool providers made every effort to ensure that their facilities attracted parents. Facilities are thus various and abundant in many preschools in Taiwan. Some preschools have even introduced high technology such as computers or live online video links into preschools.

However, the standards for judging the quality of the facilities are subjective. Jun and Chen were attracted by new modern colourful and 'fancy' facilities. Shieh liked the school with a large open space, a swimming pool and gardens. Ling did not like the facilities of the preschool she chose; she preferred a preschool with a lively and colourful environment and a variety of facilities for children to play with. Ling said "*I had been to the school and I was quite disappointed with the school's facilities. The school environment looked so bland*". On the other hand, May had a different approach. She visited one school which had a big indoor space and professional and luxurious facilities but she preferred a school with outdoor space and many trees rather than a colourful and 'fancy' facilities. She preferred a preschool set in a natural environment. We did not get a clear definition of the quality of the facilities from the parents' preferences but we can confidently say that if the environment of a preschool was not attractive to parents, it would not be considered.

However, Jun and Hui chose preschools which were in large buildings without outdoor space. They were happy with a clean and bright environment and did not think that lack of outdoor space was a problem. Those schools used central air conditioners so they did not open windows. However, their children frequently picked up a virus, which led them to believe that the air conditioning was responsible. They did not realize this before their children went to the schools.

Both Jun and Chen were attracted by the facilities of the preschools they chose when they visited. However, when their children were in the preschools, they felt disappointed with the limited opportunities that their children had to use those facilities. Both of them were attracted by the structural quality of facilities when they chose preschools but they felt disappointed about the process quality of the school's use of these facilities. It was difficult for parents to know how often the children would use the facilities when they chose preschools.

#### Child-teacher ratios

The child-teacher ratio was another criterion for some parents choosing a preschool. A preschool was their children's first experience of collective life outside their family or nanny's family. It was quite difficult for young children to get used to the new life in a big group. Three-year-old children especially were becoming less physically dependent on adults, though parents in this research believed their children still needed adults' attention and help. They worried that if the child-teacher ratios were high, children would not have enough attention from teachers. Therefore, when parents visited a preschool, they asked the staff about the ratios in a class to make sure that their children would have enough attention from teachers in a classroom. Siao, Chong and Jian pointed out that they did not choose some preschools because the size of the class was big or the child-teacher ratio was high. For example, Chen liked Kai School and Wen School because both schools met her preferences. However, the child-teacher ratios in Kai School were 16:3 but Wen School had only two teachers in a class and the ratio was 15:2. Therefore, Chen accepted her husband's suggestion and chose Kai School for her daughter. Similarly, Siao was considering Qi School and



Bao School for her daughter. She chose Qi School because it had a smaller class size and lower child-teacher ratios. May chose a preschool in which the child-teacher ratio was 30:2. She considered moving her daughter to a preschool where child-teacher ratios could be 30:4 (two teachers and two student-teachers with thirty children).

Ling mentioned that she preferred a class with two teachers because this would give more flexibility in providing support for children's individual needs. She gave an example: *"If one child wanted to go to the toilet during a lesson, one teacher could go with him/her and another teacher could stay in the class to continue the lesson"*.

The child-teacher ratios sometimes changed after the parents had made their decisions. Fang was disappointed that the ratios were increased in her child's class by the time of the second interview because her daughter's teachers had left the school. She felt that influenced the quality of support for the children's needs. She mentioned her thoughts to the head-teacher, who promised the situation would improve. However, the situation had not improved after many months. Fang's daughter took a long time to get used to a new environment. She did not want to move her child to another preschool.

Basically, when parents in this research talked about class sizes or ratios, they preferred a small sized class with low child-teacher ratios. If there were two teachers to a class, they would be pleased about it. In fact, most schools that parents chose had two teachers in charge of the class, especially for the class of three-year-olds. For the bilingual class, parents mentioned that there was at least one Taiwanese teacher and one foreign teacher in the class, although this gave no indication of how responsibilities were shared between them. As Gao said *"There were two teachers in*

*the class, one Taiwanese teacher and one foreign teacher, but I don't know how they cooperated with each other in the teaching young children or how they cooperate with each other in the class".*

### **5.2.3 Teachers**

Preschool teachers play critical roles in young children's learning. A good teacher offers children appropriate learning experiences and supports parents' involvement in their children's education (Curtis, 1998). Marsh (1994) suggests that teachers and staff need to be sensitive in all their interactions with young children, parents and colleagues. In addition, teachers have to have knowledge and expertise in the field of early childhood education in order to provide a positive influence within the environment of the children in their care (Drury et al., 2000). Therefore, high quality teachers should build up relationships of trust with children and parents. They also need to recognize the children's own needs.

Parents in this research preferred a kind, patient and sensitive teacher with good strategies for teaching children but few parents listed the qualifications of teachers. In addition, eight parents in this research preferred to have a foreign teacher to teach their children English.

#### Teachers' characters

When asked about what they expected in teachers, twelve parents mentioned teachers' characters. They preferred a teacher with patience, kindness and sensibility to support their child's needs. They realized that their children cannot always express their needs

with ease. In particular, when young children have just joined a new environment, they do not feel secure. They needed a teacher with the patience to listen to what they say and reduce their anxieties.

In addition, pre-school children are developing their fine-motor skills and learning to control their toilet habits. Teachers' support is very important for their physical needs. If a teacher does not have the patience or experience, they may not know how to help young children. Jun, for example, moved her son to another school because she was not pleased with the teacher's attitude towards her son's toilet habits.

May mentioned that she was not concerned about the teachers' characters when she chose a preschool because she thought all pre-school teachers were similar. However, after her child had begun preschool, she realized the importance of teachers' characters because they influence the interaction with other children and may also affect children's social development. She found that a sensitive teacher can more easily discern her daughter's needs. Her finding is similar to Marsh's (1994) perspective which has been discussed in Chapter Two. Chong and Fang observed the interaction between teachers and children when they visited preschools. They chose the preschools in which teachers had what they felt were good interactions with the children. They believed children had to feel that they were loved and cared for. Fang observed the interactions between teachers and children when she chose a preschool. She felt teachers' attitudes were very natural and from her perspective, they really loved the children. She saw a teacher hug a child when she was crying. She said "*The attitudes of teachers were concerned about the children's needs but they did not spoil children. I decided to send my child there because it is good*". Chong chose Su School because the teacher talked to her daughter in a friendly way and was concerned about

her daughter's feelings.

In addition, the teachers' character affected the quality of communication between teachers and parents. For example, an enthusiastic teacher would like to spend more time talking to parents about their children's work progress. Teachers and parents had a good relationship, as in Siao's experience. Shieh was satisfied with her son's teacher because Shieh felt the teacher was enthusiastic. On the other hand, Hui mentioned that she did not like to communicate with the assistant teacher because of the way she talked to her. Despite this, however, Hui still believed she was a good teacher.

In addition to a kind, patient and sensitive character, Hsu and Weng expected the teacher to help their children develop good behaviour and attitudes. They preferred a teacher who had clear principles of discipline in teaching and caring for children. Weng was a mother who did not spoil her child. During the interview, she mentioned several times that her child had to learn the 'rules of living', which could be accepted by people in general, as soon as possible because no one would make a concession to him in a wider society. He had to respect others' feelings and behave well. Therefore, she preferred a teacher who was firm and had clear principles. Hsu wanted her child to develop good habits for daily life so she preferred a teacher who understood the importance of discipline.

Ming had his personal preference for a pre-school teacher. However, his statement of a teacher's character was not clear. He preferred a teacher with 'the style of an office lady'. When I asked him about his definition of 'the style of an office lady', he did not know how to explain it but he mentioned that he did not like teachers with Taiwanese accents and preferred that his child should not be taught by an indigenous member of

staff<sup>33</sup>.

Although parents made clear their preferences for teachers, only Chen, Hsu, Fang and Chong paid attention on teachers' quality when they chose preschools. Chen visited Kai School three times to observe the interaction between teachers and children, and enquire about teachers' backgrounds before making her decision. Chong compared the teacher-child interaction in the different preschools she visited. Fang spent time to observe the interaction between teachers and children when she visited a preschool. Other parents did not know who would be their children's teacher when they made their decisions and they did not spend time talking to teachers in order to understand the teachers' abilities. Even though Jun had unhappy experiences with teachers in previous schools, she did not request information about teachers when she visited a new preschool. May said *"I don't know who would be my daughter's teachers when I made my decision. If I ask for my friends' suggestion, they only know their own children's teachers"*. Therefore, parents had their preferences for teachers' characters but it was difficult for them to determine teachers' characters or teacher-child interactions when they visited preschools.

### Teachers' qualification

As discussed in Chapter Two, early childhood experts (Roseman, 1999; Sylva et al., 2003) believe that teachers must be qualified as pre-school teachers in order to have appropriate and relevant knowledge about the care and education of young children.

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<sup>33</sup> This refers to important markers of social difference and discrimination in Taiwan, based on the different populations that have moved to the island at different times. Accent can be an important source of cultural capital-or lack of it. By many Taiwanese, the original indigenous inhabitants are treated as socially and culturally inferior.

However, my research showed that only Chen, Chong and Jian believed teachers' qualification influenced the quality of children's pre-school experience and requested the information about those qualifications when they visited preschools. Chong and Jian believed teachers had to be qualified in order to have appropriate knowledge to teach and care for young children. They asked about the qualification of teachers when they visited. Chen enquired about and compared teachers' backgrounds in two different classes for three-year-olds and chose one specific class for her daughter when she visited Kai School. However, she argued that teachers' characters were a more important influence than their qualifications as far as teaching quality was concerned.

On the other hand, most parents were not aware of the teachers' backgrounds and qualifications when they made their choice of preschools. They did not think having qualified teachers was an important criterion for choosing a preschool. For Hsu, even though the school listed the information about the staff's qualifications on a notice board, she did not pay attention to it. Jun agreed that a preschool teacher should be qualified but she did not request information about the certification of her child's teacher when she moved her child to the third preschool. Shieh was told the qualification of her child's teacher only after her child had joined Shuan School. She did not ask for this information before making her decision.

If we looked at the interview data from eighteen parents in detail, four reasons might contribute to this finding. Firstly, some of parents might believe teachers' teaching skills and patience had a stronger influence on the quality of teaching and care of young children than a teacher's qualifications. In Gao's opinion "*A teacher may have a high qualification but she may not be good at teaching*". Similarly, Jeng believed a

teacher's patience was more important than her qualification. Teachers with a higher degree might appear distant when dealing with parents. Secondly, some parents believed that a preschool with a good reputation guaranteed the quality of teachers. For example, Hui and Gao trusted the preschools they chose. Both the preschools were chain schools and had clear standards for employing teachers. Shieh trusted Shuan School because it had been running for many years and had a good reputation. These parents believed teachers in these schools would be good on the basis of reputation or the existence of defined standards. Thirdly, some parents believed high quality head-teachers would choose high quality teachers. For instance, Jun and Ming believed good head-teachers would do their best to maintain the reputation of their preschools; therefore, they would choose appropriate teachers. Ming believed that a head-teacher's knowledge of early childhood education could influence the quality of a preschool. So these parents were not worried about the teachers' qualifications at the preschools they chose. Finally, parents might think it was unfriendly to ask about a teachers' background. Jun felt it was impolite to question the teachers' background, qualifications and experience. As a result, those parents did not question teachers' qualifications when they chose preschools.

Thirteen parents in this research believed English language learning was an important part of preschool education and some of them chose bilingual preschools for their children. Surprisingly, when asked what the nationalities or backgrounds of the foreign teachers were, none of them knew, except Jun who knew the foreign teacher in her daughter's school came from the Netherlands, but even she did not know what qualification the teacher had. Parents did not request the information about foreign teachers as long as there were foreign teachers teaching their children English in the preschools. Another reason that parents were not aware of the foreign teachers'

backgrounds was that they did not feel confident enough to talk to the foreign teachers. Jian said *"The foreign teacher may love to share her experience with us; however we have to understand what she is talking about. My English is not good enough to understand what she says. I don't feel confident to ask about her personal background"*. Consequently, they did not communicate with foreign teachers and that might well inhibit parents requesting information about their qualifications. The situation had not improved after their children were in preschools. Parents still did not feel they had got to know the foreign teachers.

Moreover, there is no regulation specifically permitting prospective parents to be given information about the qualifications of foreign teachers in preschools. Preschools can not formally employ a foreign teacher (Ministry of Education, 2003). Most foreign teachers are primarily employed by cram schools and are introduced to teach in preschools. According to the regulations for cram schools, foreign teachers only need to have a two-year college certificate and do not need to have an early childhood educational qualification. Therefore, the quality of foreign teachers employed in Taiwan has been questioned by many Taiwanese early childhood educators (Lin, 2002; Wei, 2002; Wu, 2004).

### Teacher's ages

Another area in which four parents expressed interest was teachers' ages. Parents have different preference about teachers' ages. Ling and Weng preferred a young teacher because they believed that a young teacher had a lively teaching style. They felt easy to communicate with young teachers. Conversely, Jun and Chong did not prefer young teachers because they believed a young teacher lacked patience and



experience of young children.

### Satisfactions with teachers' qualities

It was difficult to discover the qualities of teachers when parents paid short visits to preschools. Teacher quality is not only about teachers' characters or qualifications but also about their teaching styles and communicating skills. After their children were in preschools, most parents were happy with the main teachers' patience and kindness. Hsu and Ping were amazed at the disciplining skills of teachers because of children's improvement in independence and manners. On the other hand, in the second phase of interviews, some parents made negative comments on the disciplining skills of teachers, foreign teachers' quality and the communicating skills of an assistant teacher.

Jeng and Chen were disappointed with their children's behaviour and attitude. They believed it was due to lack of discipline in preschools. However, Chen and Jeng had different attitudes on these points. Chen talked to the teacher about her disappointment and her requests. She realized it was due to the school's culture. After she discussed it with the main teacher, the situation improved. By contrast, Jeng was not happy that the teachers in her children's school always rewarded children by giving them sweets, or biscuits. She did not agree with that. However, Jeng did not discuss it with the teacher because she did not feel comfortable and confident to talk to the teacher about her concern. The situation did not improve. She thought about moving her daughters to another preschool.

Fang faced a different problem. Fang's daughter used to have two high quality

teachers who had good interactions and relationships with the children. However, both of them had left the preschool by the time of the second interview. One new teacher was assigned to teach her daughter's class. This teacher did not pay as much attention to the children as previous teachers so she was not familiar with her daughter. When the second semester started, her daughter became disinterested in the morning lessons. After Fang made an effort to communicate with the teacher frequently, the situation has improved, but Fang still preferred the previous teachers.

Siao talked of her dissatisfaction with the foreign teacher's character in her second interview. She said the teacher was not patient in teaching young children and her daughter had lost interest in learning English. Hui also talked about the foreign teachers in the second interview. She found the foreign teacher had a strange accent and it affected her daughter's English pronunciation. However, the foreign teacher had a good relationship with her daughter. She did not want to talk about this issue to the head-teacher.

From the above discussion about parents' satisfaction with teachers' quality, it was difficult for parents to assess teachers' qualities when they chose preschools. There were some issues related to process features of quality that parents need time to discover. In addition, we can see the importance of communication between teachers and parents. Parents appreciated teachers who contacted them actively. However, due to market competition, the head-teacher and staff would try their best to meet parents' requests and needs. If parents regularly communicated their concerns to head-teachers or teachers, the situation would generally improve. However, the findings showed that parents' background and their characters might affect their willingness to communicate with teachers. This issue will be discussed in Chapter Six.

#### **5.2.4 School meals**

Normally preschool-aged children in Taiwan attend preschool education for the whole day and consequently they have a least three meals (one mid-morning snack, lunch and mid-afternoon meal) per day. As a result, school meals become important for providing the nutrition that children need. Jian believed school meals were important. She said:

*"School meals are very important because the school provides the main part of the children's diet. I looked at the menus to make sure that the school meals gave adequate nutrition" (Jian in the first interview).*

Jun, Chen and Jian mentioned that they asked for information about the school meals when they visited a school. Jun and Chen preferred a preschool which provided breakfast to children. Jun made some suggestions for school meals to the head-teacher when she visited Choc School. The head teacher accepted her suggestions. She was delighted with that. However, after her son was in Choc School, she found the amount of food that the school provided for children was not enough; consequently her son was too hungry to walk back home.

#### **5.2.5 Curriculum**

Curtis (1998) points out that the preschool curriculum should be based on the processes of growth and experience which children have. Adults have to provide the appropriate experiences to allow the child to develop the skills and knowledge which will form the basis of later learning. Young children need a broad balanced and relevant curriculum (DES, 1990). However, only Fang, Weng and May in this research were

concerned about a broad, balanced curriculum. Weng believed that the curriculum had to be based on children's interests, then they would achieve more. Therefore, she believed that teachers' capabilities in arranging activities for their teaching were more important than a strict curricular plan. Children should have enjoyment in learning. Fang had a similar concern. She said *"I think it is more important that children develop an interest in learning. I don't agree with filling children only with cognitive curricula"*.

Weng, May, Fang, Chong and Ye, mentioned that they were not concerned about the curriculum in preschool education. May and Fang said the reason they were not concerned about the school curriculum was because they could teach cognitive knowledge to their child themselves. They were more concerned about their children's happiness in preschools. Both of these parents had high educational backgrounds and thus felt confident in supporting their children's cognitive development. Similarly, Ye did not worry about the curriculum in the preschool. Ye's father-in-law was a retired teacher and he spent lots of time teaching her son. Chong mentioned that curricula in preschools were similar for her so she could not tell the difference between each school. Chong did not pay much attention to preschool curricula in this respect. She thought that having a happy child in a school was more important than learning something. For Weng, May, Fang, Chong and Ye, meeting and playing with peers was more important than acquiring knowledge. Chong and Ye preferred bilingual preschools but it was not an important criterion for them when they chose preschools for their children.

On the other hand, many parents mentioned that they wanted their children to be well prepared for primary school. Academic learning, therefore, was an important part of

the preschool curriculum. Those parents might not have complete knowledge about which curriculum was appropriate for preschool children, but they expected their children to have had a good grounding in academic skills before primary school. Hsu, Ling, Siao, Sing and Jian mentioned that they wanted their child to learn basic academic skills such as Chinese phonic symbols, Chinese and English literacy and basic calculating capabilities. Jian moved her child to Shuan School because of her concern over the transition to primary school. She thought the curriculum in Shuan School had a similar structure to that in a primary school. In addition, English language is a subject in primary school and perceptions of its importance as a 'global language', giving access to advantages, are increasing in Taiwan. It is not surprising, therefore that thirteen parents (including Ye and Chong) preferred to have English language teaching in the preschool curriculum.

Jun and Gao mentioned that they preferred a preschool to have strict timetable, curriculum structure and textbooks. From my conversations with several parents it seems that such a strict plan gives them the impression of sound preparation in the school curriculum and also helps parents to have clear ideas about what their children will be taught in the preschools and assess their progress. From Jun and Gao's preferences for a preschool curriculum, we could understand some parents in Taiwan still believe that a formal teacher-directed learning experience with textbooks and a strict curricular structure is more effective than children-centred activities and play. These different concepts of children's learning led to parents having different preferences and expectations of preschool education from those widely held in Western society (Kwon, 2002).

### Satisfaction with the curriculum

When asked about their satisfaction with the curriculum in the second interviews, most parents' responses varied according to their own concerns. This seems to imply that their ideas or expectations of the curriculum were not clear. May, Ye, Shieh and Chong seemed to be satisfied with the fact that their children were happy in the preschools because the curriculum was diverse and appropriate for them. While the other thirteen parents were concerned about English learning, they did not have a clear idea about the overall content of the curriculum. Hsu and Ping knew that there were English lessons everyday in their children's schools, however they did not know the content of English lessons. Weng knew her son had English lessons in the preschool because she heard him singing English songs and rhymes. Hui, Gao and Jian said that they did not pay attention to what the curriculum was about, because they trusted the preschools' reputation. They believed that a preschool with a good reputation would have a good curriculum. Generally, they were happy with their children's progress.

In contrast, Jeng and Ling had a disagreement with the curriculum that the schools had provided. Jeng and Ling complained about the teachers' asking children to recite "Syiau Jieng". For them, it was too difficult for three-year-olds. Jeng felt the progress of the curriculum in the preschool was too slow, because she believed the teachers should focus more on academic learning. Sing's husband had the same worry. Sing's husband thought that the teaching of writing and calculating should be included in the curriculum although their son was only four years old, while Sing was happy with the curriculum. Jun chose the preschool because of its strict timetable; however, she was disappointed to find later that the school changed the timetable. She was upset when

the English class was changed to a craft class (see Chapter Four).

The cases of Siao and Fang illustrate that parents' satisfaction can be less related to the curriculum itself than to whether the curriculum was suitable for their children's interest or capabilities. Accordingly, it led them to change their ideas about what the preschool curriculum should provide for their children. Siao said: *"I thought children only needed to learn living habits and good behaviour in pre-school stage but I was wrong"*. She found her daughter did not like English lessons, and then began to wonder whether the whole English language approach might be inappropriate for her daughter. Her concern grew after she learned that her nephew, who went to the same preschool, was struggling to keep up with the Chinese class in the primary school. Her concern then became focused on the curriculum itself, i.e. whether the priority of English over Chinese is necessary in preschools. Likewise, Fang chose a school that adopted a Montessori approach in the morning lessons, during which children were allowed to choose freely what they wanted to learn. However, she realised her daughter did not enjoy this free choice learning as much as she did the structured curriculum in the afternoon. She said *"A Montessori approach might be good for other children but not for my daughter"*.

#### **5.2.6 Thinking of moving to other preschools**

Parents were generally satisfied with their choices in this research, although some of them had comments about what the preschools offered to their children. Fang was not happy that the teacher and the class size in the school had been changed. Ling mentioned that the quality of facilities had not been improved. Jun, Hui, Chen, Jeng, Siao and Ling, had concerns about the process quality of the schools, such as the

opportunities for using facilities, or teacher-child interaction, and the activities or contents of the curriculum. However, only Jun, Siao and Jeng wanted to move their children to other preschools because of their dissatisfaction and Ling, Fang, and Hui took no action. Ling was not satisfied with the school but her sister-in-law was a teacher in the school. She trusted the teachers in the school. Fang did not think about moving her daughter to another school because she worried that her daughter would need to spend time adapting to the new environment and people. Fang decided to talk frequently with the teacher to improve her daughter's learning and her interactions with the teacher. Hui had the same concern; she therefore chose to spend some time correcting her daughter's English pronunciation and avoided talking to the assistant teacher.

Eight parents in this research had considered moving their children to other preschools. Parents' concerns about moving their children to other preschools were different and complex (see Table 5.2). Only Siao and Ming had made up their minds by the time of the second interviews that they would move their children to other preschools from autumn 2006. Siao had two reasons. Firstly, she worried about her daughter's Chinese capabilities for primary school readiness. Secondly, her daughter was frustrated in learning English by the foreign teacher's attitude. Ming considered the continuity from kindergarten to primary school. That is why he wanted to move his son to another kindergarten which belongs to a primary school.

Jun complained about the time gap, the insufficient quantity of school meals, inadequate opportunities for facility use and a failure to implement the strict curriculum plan. Her dissatisfaction led her to move her son to Rin School. After a few days experience, she regretted her decision and moved her son back to Choc



School. For Jun, having a head-teacher who was easy to communicate with was more important. Jun felt comfortable communicating with the head-teacher in Choc School because the head-teacher would accept Jun's suggestions and change the school's conditions. Her behaviour represented customer choice.

Chen was not satisfied with discipline in the preschool and the opportunities to use the facilities. She also considered the distance to Kai School. However, when she judged the benefits (English language achievement of her daughter) and the risks (school culture), she decided to stay in Kai School. Jeng also did not agree with the strategy of discipline that the teachers used; therefore she visited Qing School which had been recommended by a friend. However, Jeng had to work on Saturday but Qing School did not provide a weekend program. Her daughters were still in the same school by the time of the second interview.

May was in different situation. She was happy with her choice. Her daughter liked the teachers and she enjoyed her pre-school life in Guan School. May was only concerned about the child-teacher ratios in Guan School. She had considered moving her daughter to Shir School, which had a similar quality of preschool facilities to Guan School, but had lower child-teacher ratios than Guan School. However, the school hours in Shir School could not meet her needs. She was also concerned about her daughter's feelings. She decided to stay with Guan School.

Shieh had considered moving her son to other preschools because of the pressure from her parents-in-law and her husband. Although she was satisfied with her choice, she had to consider a public school for her son. However, when she compared and judged all benefits and risks between Shuan School and Chin public kindergarten, she

decided to persuade other members in the family to accept her original choice (Shuan School).

Table 5.2: Concerns about moving to a different preschool

	<b>The reason for thinking about changing</b>	<b>Decision</b>
<b>Jun</b>	Dissatisfaction with the time gap, insufficient quantity of school meals, inadequate opportunities for facility use and a failure to comply with the strict curriculum plan.	Had changed to Rin School for a couple of days but moved back to the original school (Choc School)
<b>Siao</b>	Dissatisfaction with the curriculum for Chinese literacy and foreign teacher's attitude.	Will change to a public school
<b>Jeng</b>	Dissatisfaction with teachers' discipline strategy.	Stay in the same school
<b>May</b>	Concern about child-teacher ratios but did not have strong opinion for moving to other school	Stay in the same school
<b>Ming</b>	The continuity with a primary school	Will change to a school which belongs to a primary school
<b>Shieh</b>	Other family members' pressure	Stay in the same school
<b>Chen</b>	Distance/ Convenience	Stay in the same school

### 5.2.7 Key issues

Summarizing from the above analysis, parents' criteria for an attractive physical environment in a preschool included a clean, safe and roomy school with various facilities and a low child-teacher ratio. Most parents visited different preschools and compared the quality of physical environment. They showed a clear preference for the quality of the physical environment when they selected preschools for their children.

On the other hand, parents appeared unclear in their preferences for the quality of

teachers when they chose preschools. Most parents mentioned that they preferred a teacher with a kind and patient character. Chen and Hsu considered the teachers for their children when they chose the preschools. Only Chong, Fang and Chen spent time to observe the interaction between the teachers and children to judge the teachers' character. It was quite difficult for parents to make a clear judgment on a teacher's quality during the short visits. This result caused Jun to move her son several times. Jeng thought about moving her daughter to another preschool. Many researchers (Roseman, 1999; Wood and Attfield, 1996) believe that teachers' qualifications have a strong influence on preschool quality; however, in my research, this was not an important concern for parents when they chose a preschool. Eight parents chose a preschool which had foreign teachers to teach their children English because they were concerned about their children's English language learning. However, none of them knew about the foreign teachers' backgrounds or qualifications. Hui found that the foreign teacher had strange accent and Siao found the foreign teacher in her daughter's class was not patient.

For the preschool curriculum, parents also appeared unclear about standards. It was the first experience for most of the parents in this research in choosing a preschool for their children. They were aware of their lack knowledge of young children's learning and preschool curricula. As Shieh said *"To be honest, I am a beginner as a mother and I don't know anything about curricula for young children"*. Because they lacked knowledge of young children learning, they had different preferences for preschool curricula from early childhood professionals. Many of them expected the preschool curriculum would form the foundation of primary curricula in order to prepare academic skills for primary school education, especially for the five year-old class. In addition, thirteen parents were concerned about their children's English language

learning because English is a global language and a formal subject in primary curricula. Thus many parents preferred a preschool curriculum covering English language teaching. In order to have better achievement in English language learning, Jun, Hsu, Hui, Gao, Chen and Jian preferred a school using a bilingual approach. However, parents were still not aware of the preschool curricula even after their children had been to preschool. They were satisfied with their children's improvement by hearing their children counting numbers, singing English songs or speaking English words or phrases. Only Chen understood well the conditions of the preschools that she chose.

When parents chose a preschool for their children, it was easy to assess the quality of structural features, such as physical environment or having foreign teachers. It was difficult for parents to assess the process quality. After their children were in preschools, parents had a better understanding about both structural and process quality in a preschool, such as interaction and communication between teachers and children, or teachers and parents, adequate opportunities for using the facilities or appropriate activities and curriculum. Their understanding led to their satisfaction on the pre-school facilities and sometimes led them to change their views on the quality of the preschool. For example, Chen realized the importance of quality teachers. Fang found the importance of teacher-parent communication.

In addition, we see that different parents prioritized different criteria when choosing a preschool. The outcomes of decision making were different according to their different priorities (see Table 5.1). They visited schools and took their criteria into consideration when choosing a preschool for their child. Even though they might prefer a school which was near their house or their parents' house, they had other

concerns which influenced their final choice of preschool, such as safety and trust in teachers. According to rational choice theory, rational individuals have a priority of preferences when comparing possibilities to maximize benefits and minimize risks (Scott, 1995; Zey, 1998). Parents knew what their children needed and what they would need at this stage. They took their children's needs into account and judged benefits and risks when choosing a preschool for their children. For example, Hsu preferred a bilingual preschool. However, when she was concerned about her daughter's English learning and the amount of sleep she was getting, she chose a preschool which was closer to home, even though it did not have a bilingual approach. May and Shieh chose a school with a big outdoor space to help their children develop motor skills. For May, the development of her daughter's motor skills was more important than cognitive knowledge. For Shieh, a high quality pre-school environment was more important than tuition fees. Chen considered the provision of English literacy teaching and also the child-teacher ratios in choosing Kai School. Ling and Sing chose their preschools because they trusted the teachers in the preschools and believed their children would get full attention from the teachers. Weng chose the preschool which was next to her parents' house. Weng believed that because her son was familiar with the school environment and teachers, he would not need to spend much time adapting to pre-school life. Hui and Gao chose the preschools which were chain schools. They trusted that they would have a certain level of quality. Jian had a similar concern. She mentioned that she could not assess the teachers' quality but she knew it was very important. Therefore, choosing a preschool with a good reputation would guarantee the quality of teachers and curriculum. Parents calculated the benefits and risks, and made their decisions which were based on certain conditions. Although they had to take some uncertain risks, there were still rationalities in their actions.

### **5.3 How do they gather information?**

The pre-school market in Taiwan is an active, indefinite and dynamic market. Different forms of preschools construct the preschool market. There are many preschools in different local areas in Taiwan from which parents can make a choice. Therefore, getting useful information would be their first strategy in choosing a preschool. The findings of this research showed parents gained information about preschools from their external or internal social networks, the internet or by personally visiting schools.

#### **5.3.1 External social networks**

Parents asked about their neighbours' experience. They obtained information about schools which were near their house and found a preschool with good reputation in their local area. This was the approach of Jun, Fang and Gao. Some parents, for example Gao, Chen and May, who wished to be able to pick up their child after work also collected information from their colleagues who may have had experience of these preschools. Because their colleagues might have similar educational backgrounds, they might have similar values for pre-school education.

Chen, May, Jun, Shieh, Chong, Jian, Hui, Gao and Hsu actively sought information from various sources and worried that they did not have enough information to choose an appropriate preschool. They sought information from their friends', colleagues' or neighbours' which related to pre-school education. Therefore, before their daughters reached the age for pre-school education, May and Shieh had already developed

preferences for certain preschools. Such discussions with other potentially informed people also helped parents gain information about the process quality of preschools. For example, Hsu asked her friend about the teachers' teaching style, which she could not discover when she visited a preschool for short time.

### **5.3.2 Relatives**

Parents' relatives were also a resource in getting information for choosing preschools. If their relatives had relevant experience, they were happy to discuss issues related to the choice of a preschool with them. For example, Hsu considered sending her child to a bilingual preschool but she was concerned about the long journey to the preschool. She discussed her concern with her sister and sister-in-law and accepted their suggestions. Chen's sister had a child one year older than Chen's daughter, therefore they frequently discussed and shared information on preschools and Chen mentioned that she accepted her sister's opinion because they had held similar values for everything since childhood. However, some parents tended to get information on preschools from friends, colleagues or neighbours rather than from their relatives because their relatives may not live close to them, such as those of Fang and May, or they may not have experience in choosing a preschool, such as Ming.

### **5.3.3 Internet**

The number of people using the web to search for information has increased in the past few years. There are many online discussion-boards related to pre-school information. Most preschools in Taiwan also have their own website to introduce their facilities and environment. Thus parents can get useful information online easily. For

instance, Chen visited preschool websites to compare the resources of preschools and visited discussion-boards to get other people's opinions on the Montessori approach. Hui accessed the information about national evaluation of preschools as a reference for choosing a school.

#### **5.3.4 Schools**

Ming, Chong and Shieh, chose preschools by visiting them personally to gain information. Ming visited every preschool close to his home to clarify his preferences. Chong and Shieh visited schools which had a good reputation and were close to their homes to gain information and make their choices.

It is clear that most parents in this research tried to use different actions to collect information about preschools before making their decisions. They paid attention to other people's opinions or searched for information themselves in order to develop their criteria for choosing preschools. They also visited different preschools and compared the different facilities. The purposes of these actions for parents were to choose a 'good' preschool for their children.

#### **5.4 What are the influences on the choice process?**

During the process of making their choice, there were certain influences on the parents which had to be taken into account. In Taiwan, family members have strong ties. Therefore, when parents chose a preschool for their children, grandparents or other members might give advice which parents could not disregard. Such advice would affect their choice in varying degrees. In addition, as explained in the first



chapter, the Taiwanese Government had tried to implement policies in order to improve the quality of preschools. These policies might have different levels of influence on parents' when they chose preschools.

#### **5.4.1 Family**

Collectivism is an important element in Taiwanese society, as it has always been in traditional Chinese culture (Hofstede, 1997; Kwon, 2002). In Taiwan, the family is emphasized as the most important influence in child rearing practices. The family unit is more highly valued than the individual. Dependence on others is desirable and it strengthens the relationship among people (Hofstede, 1997; Yunus, 2005). Parents are dependent on their children but also support their children. This relationship is continued even when the children have grown up and have their own families. This value is reflected in the family structure in Taiwan. An extended family is still a very important family structure. Although some young couples may prefer to live separately from their parents, many of them live close to their parents and still ask grandparents to look after their children. It is common practice for young children to be raised by their parents and their grandparents (Yunus, 2005).

Another important value in Chinese culture is that individual members make every effort to promote the welfare and harmony of their family (Hofstede, 1997; Yunus, 2005). Grandparents provide an excellent support for young mothers in terms of child care. In half the cases in this research, grandparents took the main responsibility for caring for young children before they went to preschools. When children went to preschool, parents relied on grandparents to pick them up at the end of each day. These factors influenced the parents' choice of preschool. Parents, such as Ming, Kao,

Hui, Weng, Chong, Shieh and Ping, had to consider the convenience of grandparents because they needed them to pick up their children.

Moreover, grandparents were involved in the care of young children; thus, their opinions had to be taken into account in order to maintain the harmony of family. For instance, Hui chose a preschool which met her mother's preference. Ming stopped his son's school life because of the grandmother's concern. Chong's mother-in-law did not agree with Chong about sending her daughter to a preschool. Chong had to ask her husband to persuade her mother-in-law. The process of decision making had to involve the grandparents' opinions. However, grandparents had a different educational background and lifestyle which influenced their valuation of pre-school education. The process became complicated and caused conflict. In Shieh's case, she had a different preference for a preschool from that of her parents-in-law. She tried hard to persuade them to accept her choice. Chen and Ping had to visit preschools which did not match their criteria because their parents-in-law asked them to take these preschools into account when making their choice.

Conversely, Sing trusted her mother's opinion although she also was familiar with the preschool. Thus, she accepted her mother's suggestion and sent her child to the school which was near her parents' house. Ling, Siao and Jeng were not confident in choosing preschools. Ling and Siao chose the preschools their sisters-in-laws suggested. Jeng did not choose the preschool herself but one recommended by her aunt.

Surprisingly, from the findings, fathers' opinions were not considered in many cases. Only Hsu chose the preschool with her husband and they visited the preschool

together. Chen only required her husband's opinion when she faced a difficult choice. Sing, Shieh and Ping had mentioned about their husbands' expectation of pre-school education, but when I asked other parents about the role of the opinions of the child's father in choosing a preschool, many replied in similar terms to May's statement:

*"My husband doesn't have any opinion about raising a child and always depends on my opinions. He is too busy to pay attention to my daughter's education or care. Therefore, I take all responsibility for raising my child. I told him which preschool I had chosen and also my criteria in making that choice but he didn't have a clear idea about it. For example, I wanted to take my daughter to see a doctor recently because of her eyes. My husband didn't have any information. Men don't have clear ideas about it. I think I have to ask my colleagues to know which doctor is better. It is the same as choosing a pre-school setting. It is always like that" (May in the first interview).*

It would appear that mainly mothers are involved in the education of their children at the pre-school stage (Curtis, 1998). David et al's (1997) study found that in the Western context, mothers also take the major responsibility for choosing schools for young children.

To sum up, family relationships have a complex influence on parents when making their choices. They sought pre-school information actively from the people they trust, but father did not have strong influence on the choice process. Ming is the only father involved in this research and only Chen, Hsu, Sing, Shieh and Ping mentioned their husband's opinions of preschools. Moreover, parents have to take into account grandparents' feelings and give due weight to their suggestions. This means the process of choosing a school becomes more complicated.

#### **5.4.2 The pre-school policy**

Another potential influence on parental choice of preschools is the pre-school policy. In order to improve the quality of pre-school education, social welfare and education authorities have implemented official registration, national evaluation and the early childhood educational voucher scheme. This section will present parental perspectives on these policies and how they have affected their choices. First of all it will explore parental understanding of the difference between a nursery and a kindergarten and whether the difference affected their choice. Secondly, how they understood the early childhood educational voucher scheme; who can apply, how it would work and whether parents were concerned about the voucher scheme when they chose a preschool. Finally, whether parents paid attention to the results of the national evaluation when making their choice of preschool.

##### The registration of a preschool

The two different pre-school systems in Taiwan, kindergarten and nursery, were discussed in Chapter One. Each of them is regulated by a different authority and has different standards of registration with different criteria. When parents choose a preschool for their children, perhaps they might be concerned about the registration although it did not surprise me that most parents did not know the difference between a nursery and a kindergarten because the pre-school regulations are ambiguous (see Chapter One). Parents did not ask the staff in preschools what the registration of the schools was. Therefore, most of them did not know the official registration of the preschools they chose. Some of them did not even know whether the preschool was legally registered. Consequently, when asked about registration, the answer was "I

*think it was a nursery" or "I guess it could be a kindergarten". Their reasons were diverse but unsure.*

*"I think it was registered as a nursery. A nursery could accept younger children, right? This school accepted children, even though they were only eight months so I guess it is a nursery" (Hsu in the first interview).*

Ling assumed the preschool was a kindergarten because it focused on education rather than care. Ming assumed that as the space in the preschool that he chose was small it was a nursery. Weng believed the preschool was a kindergarten because she thought a nursery only accepted young children who were under three years old. Hui assumed the preschool was a nursery although the staff of Ho School told her that it was a kindergarten. Her reason was that English literacy was taught in Ho School. She thought if it was registered as a kindergarten, it would not be allowed to teach English literacy. Chen and May knew the preschools were legally registered but they did not know as what. Their responses showed their lack of knowledge about the regulations.

Jun and Chong saw the registration certificates of the preschools that they chose and they knew the preschools were legally registered. However, they found the names on the certificates were different from the name of the preschools. They felt confused but they did not require an answer. Chong explained that she believed the preschool was originally registered as Shu Kindergarten but there was a change of name when it began to use different teaching materials designed by Gi Pre-school Institution. The name was changed to Gi Kindergarten Shu branch<sup>34</sup>. Fang did not know whether the preschool she chose was legally registered but she did not worry because it had been

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<sup>34</sup> Gi Pre-school Institution designs and sells teaching materials to pre-schools. It also has many branches.

running for many years in her local area and had a good reputation. However, Jeng's statement was unexpected. Her sister told her the preschool that she chose was not legally registered but she believed the explanation given by the head-teacher and did not take any action to find out the real situation. When I asked her about it, she said that she trusted the preschool and the head-teacher and she did not think legal registration of a preschool was important.

Only Jian paid attention on the registration of the preschool. Whether or not the preschool was legally registered was not important for other parents in this research and did not affect their decisions. Parents trust reputation and other people's recommendation. The findings may explain why many unregistered preschools still survive in the competitive world of the pre-school market.

#### The early childhood educational voucher scheme

The early childhood education voucher scheme in Taiwan was implemented in 2000. One aim of educational vouchers is to subsidize parents who send children to a private preschool in order to reduce their financial burdens and support parent's rights in choosing a preschool. In addition, educational vouchers can only be used for legally registered preschools. The Taiwanese Government assumed that the educational voucher scheme would encourage parents to choose legally registered preschools; hence it would improve the quality of preschool facilities (see Chapter One). However, from the analysis, none of the parents in this research took the voucher scheme into account when they chose a preschool. Only few of them knew about the voucher scheme when they visited preschools and questioned the staff about it. More than half of the parents had never heard about early childhood educational

vouchers. Some of them had heard about the voucher scheme but did not know how they could be used or who were eligible to apply for vouchers. That might have been due to the fact that their children were young; thus they were not qualified to apply for the voucher. Hsu said:

*"I have seen this information on the web before. But I did not understand it. I think it is only offered to the children who are five years old. I did not know whether this school accepted the educational voucher. My child is young now. I may ask for further information in the future. Can the educational voucher be offered to children for study in a nursery?" (Hsu in the first interview)*

Fang had not heard about the educational vouchers therefore she did not know whether she could use the voucher in the preschool she had chosen. When asked whether she would change to another school, if she could not use the educational vouchers in the present school, the answer was "no" because there was a risk that her daughter would need to adapt to a new environment again and it was not easy for her. Chong knew the conditions applying to the early childhood educational vouchers and complained that the amount of money was too little<sup>35</sup> and they were only offered to children who were in the final year of pre-school education. However, her daughter had started her pre-school education when she was three; therefore she would have pre-school education for three years. The allowance from educational vouchers was small compared to the fees that Chong had to pay. She said *"they would not have been any help in reducing my financial burdens. No., not at all."* The voucher scheme, therefore, did not affect her choice.

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<sup>35</sup> The scheme of Early Childhood Educational Vouchers only offers ten thousand Taiwanese dollars (about one hundred and sixty pounds) for every child who is in the final year of a private, legally registered preschool. However Chong chose the preschool in which the tuition fee was about one hundred seventy-four thousand Taiwanese dollars (about two thousand nine hundred pounds) per year.

From the above discussion, there is no conclusive proof that the voucher scheme is either efficient or effective in improving the quality of pre-school education in Taiwan. Parents choose a preschool when their children are three or four years old but educational vouchers are only supplied for children who are five. However, when their children are five years old, parents might not want to take the risk of moving their children to a preschool which could use the vouchers. The effectiveness of using the early childhood voucher scheme to raise quality has to be questioned. This finding echoes that of Taiwanese early childhood professionals (Lu and Shih, 2000; Song, 2001; Tsai, 2002) who have queried the efficiency and effectiveness of the voucher scheme.

#### National evaluation of preschools

The government's intention was that the national evaluation results could be used as a reference point for the quality of preschools. It was not difficult for parents to access the results of these evaluations. Moreover, for most preschools, if they got "excellent" results in the national evaluation, the results were displayed in a place which could be easily seen by the parents. Nonetheless, most parents in this research did not refer to the results of national evaluations when they chose a preschool. Seven of them mentioned that they had never heard about the national evaluation before. Only Chen and Hui used this result as a reference point when they selected a preschool.

Jun, Ming, Chen and Hui had heard about the national evaluation but they did not trust the results of evaluations. Jun, Ming and Chen mentioned that most preschools gaining "excellent" results in the national evaluations were public preschools. Jun and Chen did not trust the quality of public preschools; therefore, the results were doubted.



Ming found most preschools near his house had been evaluated "excellent" for the national evaluation. He believed the results must be rigged. For example, Chen visited one preschool having the "excellent" result for the national evaluation. The school environment was not clean; therefore, she doubted the reliability of the national evaluation. Hui referred to the results of the national evaluation to give her a clear idea about what a good preschool should be. However, she visited one of the preschools with the "excellent" result. She felt disappointed that the space was small and they used mosquito coil incense in a classroom. She said *"I don't know how it got 'excellent' on the national evaluation. The environment was clean but not good. Perhaps it had a nice curriculum"*. Therefore, none of the parents in this research took the result of the national evaluation of preschools into consideration when choosing preschools.

### Emerging issues

It can be concluded from this research that pre-school policies did not have any influence on parental choice. Although the early childhood educational voucher scheme has been in place for more than five years, when asked about parents' knowledge of this policy, only a few parents had correct information about it. The function of the voucher scheme is to reduce parents' financial burden. Another important purpose of applying early childhood educational vouchers is that by their use, parents would choose legally registered preschools. Given this assumption, the implementation of the voucher scheme should result in an increase in the number of legal registrations of preschools. However, the findings showed that the early childhood educational voucher scheme did not influence the process of parental choice of a preschool in many cases in this research. The reasons could be that:

- Parents could not gain correct information so they did not know about the implementation of the voucher scheme, as in the cases of Ling, Siao and Shieh.
- They only applied to the final year of pre-school children; therefore parents did not consider them when they chose a preschool. Hui and Weng are examples of such parents.
- They only gave ten thousand Taiwanese dollars (about 160 UK pounds) for one year. However, the tuition fees in private preschools are ten to thirty times more than the amount of the educational vouchers. Parents such as Chong did not think it was important and helpful when they selected a school.

Parents' knowledge of the differences between a kindergarten and a nursery appeared limited and confused. Nor did the results of national evaluation have any obvious influence on parental choices. Many parents had never heard the national evaluation project. Some parents knew about it but they did not trust the results. It is part of Chinese culture that people trust their friends and relatives. They preferred to gain the information from their friends and relatives rather than from official information. For these parents, the reputations of preschools and the recommendation of friends or relatives are more reliable than the results of any national evaluation. School environment and facilities, teachers' characters and English language teaching are more important than the official registration. However, parents may not have the correct knowledge about pre-school education or they may not receive correct information. The registration regulations of preschools have to be applied in order to have certain standards for preschools and to ensure children's rights and needs for pre-school education. In addition, the early childhood educational voucher scheme did not effectively increase opportunities of choice for low-income parents. If children

from a low-income background want to have equal opportunities for pre-school education, then affordability and accessibility to preschools has to be considered. In order to equalize the opportunity for children to have pre-school education, extending one-year national education to kindergarten could be a solution. It will be provided by legally registered schools and the tuition fees will be affordable for low-income families. As a result, children from low-income backgrounds could have the opportunity to have pre-school education at least for one-year.

However, most parents were not interested in official registration of preschools, national evaluation or early childhood educational vouchers. These policies did not influence their choices. The government wanted to use these policies to intervene and control the quality of preschools but it was not effective and efficient (Lu and Shih, 2000; Song, 2001; Tsai, 2002). However, if the government can combine pre-school kindergartens and nurseries, parents and children can have similar standards of pre-school services in both systems. Moreover, extending national education to kindergarten could provide low tuition fees for pre-school education for children. It may be more helpful than implementing educational vouchers for low-income families and provide them with more opportunities for choosing a school.

### **5.5 Advice to other parents**

The process of choosing preschools is difficult and complex in the Taiwanese pre-school market. Parents' experiences led their choice of preschool. In addition, behind the choice, the influences from society, relatives, and cultural values have to be taken into account. The following sections will present parents' suggestions for choosing preschools and the influences on parental choice which came from an

individual's social networks and the government's intervention.

Parents were asked whether they were satisfied with their children's experience in the preschools. They were not always positive about the preschool but most of them did not regret their choice. However, they still believed that some action could be taken in order to choose a better preschool for their children; especially now they had gone through the process of choosing. Therefore, their suggestions on choosing an appropriate preschool and what strategic action other parents should use before making their decisions will be discussed in this section. From their suggestions, the strategic action could be divided into evaluation by the child, visiting preschools and seeking advice.

#### **5.5.1 Evaluation by the Child**

In Weng, Ping and Chong's opinions, letting children experience preschools directly was a useful strategy because they believed children might have different feelings from adults. In Taiwan, many private preschools allow a probationary period for children. Jun and Chong suggested that children should do this<sup>36</sup>. This gives parents opportunities to observe their children's experience in the preschool. Consequently, Weng did not think it was necessary for parents to compare different preschools as the children's experience was more important. She suggested that parents should choose a preschool, which was nearest to home and convenient to parents, and let the child directly experience the school. Ping's experience also indicated the importance of evaluation. She believed children could choose a preschool by themselves after a

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<sup>36</sup> Many preschools allow children to attend for a couple of days without paying any fee. If children do not refuse to go to the school and parents are happy with the facilities, then parents can make their decision to choose the school.

probationary period. She mentioned that children's preferences for a preschool were more important than parents' aims or expectations for pre-school education. These views could explain why most private preschools in Taiwan allow a free probationary period for children. It is a strategy for pre-school providers to attract parents and to survive in the competition of the pre-school market.

### **5.5.2 Visiting preschools**

The majority of parents in the research visited preschools before making their decisions. They visited in order to look at the physical environment, the facilities, and the interaction between teachers and children. Chong and Siao said that parents should talk to teachers in order to understand their character and their approach to education. Jun also felt that talking to the head-teacher when visiting a preschool was important since one who was easy to communicate with and who could accept parents' opinions was an advantage. Jun, Ling, Siao, Sing and Fang pointed out that parents should observe the interaction between children and teachers during the visit. Sing, Chong, Shieh and May thought that parents had to observe whether the space was large enough for children to use. Siao, May and Jian said that they should examine the safety of the physical environment when visiting preschools. From her own experience, Jun felt it was important that parents visited when a lesson was taking place. They needed to observe other children's experiences in the preschool, such as how they were taught and how the facilities were used, rather than just listening to the head-teachers' or teachers' views.

### **5.5.3 Asking for advice**

May and Hsu proposed that parents could seek advice from other people who had experience of choosing preschools. They believed it helped parents to have some information about process quality (such as teacher-children interaction and teacher's attention to individual children) which was difficult to discern during a short visit.

Most parents in this research used more than one strategic action to select a preschool for their children. Whilst their own experience affected the detailed advice, their suggestions all pointed out the importance of assessing process features when they chose preschools, even to the extent that some parents recommended letting children experience preschool directly. Others advised visiting preschools or asking for advice from parents who already had children there. They all pointed out that parents had to spend time observing their children or other children's experiences in the preschools to understand teacher-children interactions and the opportunities to use the facilities.

## **5.6 Summary and conclusion of this chapter**

In this chapter, I started to discuss parental expectations of pre-school education, the process in which parents choose a preschool for their children, the influences on the process and their satisfaction with their choice. Their values and experience affected their expectations for pre-school education and also influenced their actions during the process. Parents wanted to help their children to prepare for primary schools. They were concerned about their children's social, cognitive and English language development. Their expectations affected their criteria for choosing a preschool. In addition, parents applied strategic actions, such as asking for advice, visiting schools

and letting their children evaluate when they chose a preschool. They used strategic actions to collect information and compare the advantages and benefits of each preschool.

However, the findings showed that parents felt more confident in comparing the structural quality of preschools such as child-teacher ratios, school facilities, indoor or outdoor space and group size when they visited schools. It was difficult for parents to assess the process quality of preschools because they did not have enough time or opportunity to observe teacher-child interactions or the children's experiences in the classrooms. This influenced parents' confidence in assessing the process quality of a preschool. Because of their lack of knowledge of the pre-school curriculum or children's development, some parents had different expectations of pre-school education from those of early childhood professionals' perspectives of quality of pre-school education. For example, the EPPE project (Sylva et al., 2003, 2004) shows that children have better achievements when teachers have higher qualifications and good training. But few parents were concerned about the teachers' qualifications when they chose a school. Whilst Roseman (1999) points out that teachers with higher qualifications have better knowledge and understanding about caring for and educating young children, for the parents in this research, the teachers' characters were more important than their qualification, but they found it difficult to assess a teacher's character from a short visit.

Moreover, these parents' experience showed the process of choosing a preschool was complicated and difficult. They had to consider not only their own expectations and needs, but also consider other family members' opinions and the children's needs. This tension affected their choices, their satisfactions with their choices, and some of

them considered moving their children to other preschools.

Most decisions about preschool choice in this research were made by mothers. In most cases, fathers did not play an import role during the process of selecting a preschool. Moreover, parents had to be aware of other family members' feelings to maintain the harmony in the family and this made the process of choice more difficult and complicated.

Registration regulations and the national evaluation which have been implemented to improve the quality of preschools are not effective. Parents lacked knowledge of these policies and did not trust them and so the influence of pre-school policies on parental choice was insignificant.



## **Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **6.0 Introduction**

From Chapters Four and Five, we understood how Taiwanese parents operated in preschool markets and their criteria for choosing preschools. The data were collected from parents who were willing to participate in this research; thus they might be more rational and active than others operating within preschool markets. In addition, my role as a preschool teacher trainer might influence their responses to interviews (see Chapter Three). They may consider their actions carefully and talk about their choices deeply but because of their positive actions and careful concerns, I gained more a deeper understanding of Taiwanese preschool markets. This research raises some important issues which I will address in this chapter.

First of all, how far the parents chose rationally, how Chinese culture, Western influences and family background impact on parents' decision making will be discussed. In addition, the findings show the criteria parents used to choose preschools were similar to the criteria of high quality preschool in Western research; however, there were some additional concerns which did not appear in the Western research. The reasons and assumptions behinds their choices and how parents' criteria influence preschool provision will be explored. I also argue that the Taiwanese Government has to reconceptualise preschool policy in order to improve the equality and equity of preschool provision in Taiwan. The chapter ends with some suggestions for further research.

## **6.1 Is parental choice rational?**

Rational choice theory (see Chapter Two) would indicate that choice involves many certain and uncertain variables. Rational individuals will try to have as much information as they can in order to calculate the benefits and risks of making particular choices. Zey (1998) and Scott (1995) argue that the decisions based on incomplete knowledge will lead to uncertain outcomes, but that cannot be avoided. However, individuals will maximize the benefits based on the conditions of certainty as well as taking calculable risks. For example, May was concerned about her daughter's physical development so she chose a preschool which had a big outdoor space although she could not be certain that this would improve her daughter's physical development. Hsu wanted her daughter to learn English but chose a Chinese speaking school for her daughter which was close to their house although it did not use a whole English language approach. Her decision was based on her certainty that only having to travel a short distance to preschool would ensure that her daughter had enough sleep which was more important at this stage than the uncertainty of her need for English in the future. Similarly, Weng chose the school which was next to her parents' house as it was familiar rather than risk other less known environments. Ye chose the nearest preschool for her son as she wanted to be sure that he would be safe travelling to preschool. These parents had different concerns and preferences when they made their choices of preschools for their children but all were balancing certain and uncertain conditions. However, Zey (1998: 26) questions: "*Which beliefs and preferences are rational under conditions of uncertainty?*" She concluded that it will depend on individuals' subjective values. Thus, Hui and Chen preferred preschools using the English-Chinese bilingual approach because they thought it would benefit their children but as with any speculation about the future, in reality it was uncertain.

On the other hand, Siao worried about her daughter's skills of Chinese literacy and in the second interview wanted to move her from an English speaking school to a public preschool which only spoke Chinese in the classroom. She was rejecting the uncertainty of future needs for English speaking in favour of the certainty of needing Chinese literacy skills.

Elster (1996: 12) made a similar point when arguing that: "*Rational people do as well as they can ... what counts as doing more or less well is determined by the agent's view of what is good, not by any externally imposed standard*". For example, Chen chose a preschool which used a bilingual approach which she believed would benefit her daughter's English literacy even though the tuition fees were high. For Jian, school readiness was the main purpose of preschool education. A preschool with a primary school environment and curriculum plan was her first priority. Sing and Jeng preferred preschools that taught reading and writing rather than using play and a child-centred approach. What benefits parents looked for and what costs they wanted to minimise when choosing a preschool depended on their individual values. However, individuals' values are shaped by personal backgrounds, experiences and culture (Elster, 1986; Goldthorpe, 1998; Scott, 1995).

The findings presented in Chapters Four and Five show that choosing a preschool was a complex task for many parents and they used different strategic actions to collect information about preschools and compare the qualities of different preschool provision in order to choose the 'right' or 'best' preschools for their children. The processes by which each parent chose preschools and their criteria for choosing were different but they all tried to balance rewards and costs in order to maximize the benefits for their children. The "know what I want" parents, the "know what I want

but changed my mind” parents and the “don’t know what I want but I will know it when I see it” parents asked their friends, relatives, colleagues and neighbours about their experience of choosing preschools and searched for information on websites. They also visited preschools personally and compared the qualities of each. In this way there was rationality about their choice, although some parents found it difficult to collect what might be regarded as complete information. The group of “other people know better” parents did not visit any preschools before making their decision but neither did their child go to a particular preschool by accident or coincidence (Scott, 1995). The parents had their own concerns but relied on other people’s opinions (people they trusted) as to the quality of the preschools. Therefore, it could be said that there was still rationality in their choice.

### **6.1.1 The cultural influences**

How parents calculated the benefits and costs is very much concerned with their individual values. However, these individual values will be influenced by a range of cultural values. Culture is how every person carries her/his own thinking and feeling, and actions which have been learned since early childhood and throughout their lifetime (Hofstede, 1997). Cultural beliefs and values build the ways of our daily life and we cannot avoid the cultural influence on our thinking, actions and behaviour. Bruner (1996) believed that it is culture that shapes our beliefs and values. According to Hofstede (1997), culture is a collective phenomenon, because it is shared and learned with people who live within the same social environment. As a result, people coming from the same group may have similar values and beliefs that are different from those in other groups. People from Western countries may be prey to different cultural influences than people from Eastern countries

### The values of Chinese culture

Confucianism represents the essence of traditional Taiwanese cultural values and contexts (Hsieh 2004). These values play powerful roles not only in Chinese society but also influence the cultural values of other Asian countries (Watkins, 2000; Tamai and Lee, 2002; Wise and Sanson, 2000; Wang, 2004; Yunus, 2005).

For example, this can be seen when considering how these parents calculated the costs of sending their child to a specific preschool. When Taiwanese parents calculate the benefits and costs of sending their children to preschool, they have to balance their own expectations of preschool education, their children's needs and other family members' opinions. In Chinese culture, the harmony in a family is important. When parents chose a preschool, grandparents' feelings and opinions have to be taken into account. For instance; Hui, Ming and Hsieh had to find a balance between their own preferences and their grandparents' preferences when they chose preschools for their children. Parents were not only concerned about the benefits for their own children but also wanted to minimise the costs for the whole family. One important cost would be disruption to family harmony. They may not have perfect knowledge when making their decisions but they considered the certainty and uncertainty involved in different situations, and calculated the benefits and costs of each.

These values from Confucianism also have an impact on the design of the preschool curriculum in Taiwan. Hsieh (2004) identified four dimensions of traditional Chinese early childhood education:

- Education in appropriate behaviour and polite manners. For example, young

children need to learn to eat quietly and sit still.

- Education of social manners and appropriate social interaction. For example, children were taught to show respect to elders and be kind to peers.
- Moral education included educating children to be sympathetic, honest and trustworthy.
- Cognitive education aims to develop children's basic knowledge of numbers, plants, animals and directions before they attend formal education. Reading and writing are also significant as preparation for primary school.

They may also influence parents' criteria on which their choices are based. Confucian theory emphasizes hierarchical human relationships, collectivism and academic achievement (Hofstede, 1997; Kwon, 2002). These cultural traditions and values, which differ from the Western early childhood philosophy with its emphasis on individual talent and child-centred learning experiences, will shape parents' values. Although a Western child-centred approach has been used in Taiwan for more than thirty years, Taiwanese preschool practitioners often see tensions between child-centred teaching styles and traditional hierarchical social structures and an emphasis on hard work leading to academic achievement (Hsieh, 2004).

A Chinese proverb says that 'there is nothing like study to lead you to the higher ground'. It represents how important education and effort is in Chinese and Taiwanese culture. Chinese people believe that the further people take education the higher will be their capabilities, skills and manners. Therefore, Chinese, and similarly Taiwanese, parents hold very high expectations for their children with regard to academic achievement and expect their children to work hard to meet these high expectations. Wu and Qi (2004) found that Asian-American parents, as compared

with European-American and African-American parents, had higher expectations for their children's highest degree. Like many parents, Taiwanese parents wish their children to have a better life than themselves. They believe that high academic attainment can achieve that (Hou, 2002), but to ensure this they need to equip their children with the necessary working habits as early as possible (Hewitt and Maloney, 2000). Therefore, preschool education is viewed as a way of giving their children an advantage when they start primary education.

In addition, in traditional Confucian values, children are taught to respect and obey their parents, teachers and older people; in return, parents, teachers and older people have a responsibility to give their children's lives direction and to provide a secure environment to ensure success. Therefore, Chinese parents are often found to be more authoritarian, directive, or controlling of their children than Western parents (Wang, 2004; Wu and Qi, 2004). For example, only Ping mentioned that she sought her daughter's preferences during the process of choice. Chinese parents are more concerned about children's obedience (Yunus, 2005) than Western parents. For example, Chen was concerned about daughter's behaviour and one of her criteria of quality when choosing a preschool was the teacher's disciplining skills.

Confucianism represents the essence of traditional Taiwanese cultural values and contexts. It emphasizes a social hierarchy in which persons of a lower status should respect and obey those of a higher status (Hsieh, 2004). This principle is applied in the school system. Teachers carry the highest authority and power which leads to a teacher-directed educational curriculum, not based on children's interests. For Asian parents, formal teacher-directed learning experiences are more likely to be seen as better than individualized learning (Hewitt and Maloney, 2000; Kwon, 2002). In the

traditional Taiwanese classroom, children learn through listening to the teacher (Watkins, 2000) and teachers are not expected to provide much variation in teaching methods and materials to suit individual children's needs (Hsieh, 2004; Wang, 2004). Teachers often provide whole class activities for children because of the emphasis on group activity in Asian education (Hewitt and Maloney, 2000; Kwon, 2002). Therefore, in a traditional preschool classroom, a good child is expected to follow group activities, including eating, singing, playing and going to the toilet together (Hsieh, 2004). Whole class activities and group work develops children's abilities to cooperate and collaborate, thus preparing them for adult society (Tobin et al., 1989; Yunus, 2005). As these values are different from Western values, they also influence the preschool curriculum and parents' criteria of good teaching practice. For example, Jun and Gao preferred a preschool with strict timetable and use textbooks. Ming, Jeng and Sing's husband did not agree that play was a part of learning for young children. Parents' expectations therefore affect teachers' teaching styles in preschools keen to attract custom. It is different from Western educational beliefs that young children can learn effectively through children-centred activities and play (Nutbrown, 1999; Fisher, 2002). Teachers use text-books and do whole class activities to reassure parents, because they then have a clear idea about what their children have been taught.

Collectivism is also reflected on the relationship between individual family members. In Chinese culture, the family is the most important element in child rearing practices (Yunus, 2005). The responsibility of raising young children is not solely taken by parents but also grandparents or other extended family members. It is regarded as a duty that individual members make efforts to promote the welfare, harmony and reputation of their family (Yunus, 2005). These values are part of parents' decision making and can therefore be considered rational for Taiwanese parents. They have to



consider other family member's opinions and feelings when making judgments. Many parents in this research were concerned about grandparents' feelings and opinions. Ye's case is an example. She was not concerned about the curriculum when choosing a preschool because her father-in-law was a retired teacher and would support her son's academic needs. This collective culture also influenced the strategic actions parents took when choosing preschools. Most parents tended to use their social network to explore the reputations of preschools and asked for advice or recommendations from their friends and relatives rather than trusting official reports such as the national evaluation or a schools' official registration. Consequently, Chinese culture affects the values and strategic actions of Taiwanese parents and within that culture they can be considered to be acting rationally when maximizing the benefits and minimizing the costs of preschools education.

#### The influences of Western values

However, there are also other influences on Taiwanese parents. Western missionaries introduced the Western educational system to Chinese society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and since then Western influence has been a significant factor in the provision of Chinese preschools (Hung, 2002). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were six kindergartens set up by western missionaries. These schools used new curricula and approaches to young children's learning and became the model of preschool education. They influenced the development of early childhood education in China and also in Taiwan (Hung, 2002).

Since then because many Taiwanese preschool educators have studied in Western countries such as America, Great Britain, Germany, and Australia, they have

transferred their learning to Taiwanese preschool education. They have introduced theories about child learning, teaching methods and views about children's development taken from Western research, into the Taiwanese context and preschool practices (Hung, 2002). For example, it is easy to find preschools advertising themselves as using a Montessori or Waldorf approach. In addition, the development of technology has given people easy access to Western information and knowledge. According to the 2004 White Paper for Cultural Affairs (Council for Cultural Affairs, 2004), more than one third of the population of Taiwan have internet access and nearly one hundred percent of families have at least one television (Sun, 1997). Thus the Taiwanese can easily obtain information from all over the world. As a result, child-centred learning approaches have been introduced into preschool practices and traditional teacher-directed practices for young children were challenged.

The Western perspectives also have affected individual parent's values. It has changed their expectations for the kind of preschool curriculum provided and teacher's roles. Their expectation for teachers' roles may be changed from providing models of moral behaviour to one of facilitator of learning. They wonder if a whole class activity is appropriate for their child. They may not agree that teachers have the sole authority and power in a preschool classroom. Moreover, the fact that the Taiwanese population can easily access Western information and knowledge may lead parents to be concerned about their children's English learning.

On the other hand, they will still have traditional Chinese values and aims for preschool education and children's development. The tension between Chinese culture and Western concepts of preschool education will influence parental expectations of quality and make the process of choosing a preschool become

complex and difficult. For instance, Fang believed that providing children with opportunities to choose what they wanted to do could improve children's motivation. However, she also worried that teachers were not used to a child-centred approach and lacked knowledge of about how to guide children's learning. Hui mentioned that she was not concerned about what her daughter learned as long as her daughter was happy in the school but she corrected her English pronunciation at home and revised the English literacy curriculum with her almost everyday.

These tensions were evident in the criteria for choice the parents used. Some criteria of quality defined used by the parents matched the universal definition (Cryer, 1999; Helburn and Howes, 1996; Phillipsen et al., 1997), e.g. teacher-child ratios, clean and safe physical environment, and teacher-child interaction. But, the expectation for high academic achievement and parents' anxieties for their children about facing global competition in the future were also evident. For example, English language teaching and the use of formal pedagogy in the preschool curriculum also appeared in their criteria. This is discussed later in the chapter whilst here I focus on the effects of the parents' individual backgrounds on the rationality of their choice.

### **6.1.2 The individual background influences**

From rational choice theory, we understand that individual actions at the micro level construct the macro level of social outcomes. On the other hand, an individual's actions will depend on their own values and preferences. Rational individuals will collect useful information and resources before taking an action. However, their educational and economic backgrounds and social relationships will affect the way that information and resources are accessed. Brown (1997) argues that children's

education is increasingly dependent on the wealth and wishes of parents, rather than the ability and efforts of pupils. Thus, parents' social class has an impact on children's educational opportunities and outcomes and is effective through their social and cultural capital. I first explore the concepts of social and cultural capital, and show how they can be used to explain the parents' actions. The influences of social class on parental choice of schools will be discussed later in this section.

### Social capital and parental choice

In terms of theory of rational action, in which each actor has control over certain resources and interests, social capital constitutes a particular kind of resource available to each actor. The first systematic analysis of social capital was done by Pierre Bourdieu, who defined it as: "*The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition*" (Bourdieu, 1997: 51). He proposed that the amount of social capital available depends on the size of the network that an individual can effectively mobilize and control. This network of relationships is the product of investment and cannot be naturally gained. Social capital exists in the structure of relations between individual actors and others. It is seen as a resource for each individual because increased social capital improves the quantity and quality of information flow and reduces transaction costs (Robison et al., 2002). More recently, other sociologists have applied social capital theory and adapted Bourdieu's definition as:

- "Including friends, colleagues and more general contacts from whom an individual receives opportunities to use other forms of capital" (Burt, 1992).

- “The capacity of individuals to command scarce resources by virtue of their membership in networks or broader social structures” (Portes, 1995).
- “Features of social life such as trust, norms and networks that can act together to improve the efficiency of society” (Putnam, 1993).

(all in Robison et al., 2002)

These definitions reflect Bourdieu’s view that social capital is a reproduction of social relationships (Bourdieu, 1997) and can be clearly seen in the way Chinese societies work.

Coleman (1990) argued that a rational actor controls certain resources and interests in certain conditions and events in order to make best use of their resources and social relations. An important function of social capital is that it is an aid toward making the micro level and macro level transitions. Coleman (1997) divided the concept of social capital into three forms: obligations and expectations which depend on the trustworthiness of the social environment, information channels, and norms and effective sanctions. Therefore, social capital not only facilitates certain actions but also constrains others (Coleman, 1997). See my discussion above about maintaining family harmony.

Social capital is also an available tool or resource to develop human capital. It is a resource which exists in the structure of relations between individual actors and among corporate actors. Coleman (1990) argued that social capital also exists in family relations and in community social organizations. He identified social capital as a resource within the family that exists in the structure of intergenerational relationships, especially between parents and children (Edwards et al., 2003) and it

can help children to develop their cognitive and social capabilities. He argued that “both social capital in the family and social capital in the community play roles in the creation of human capital in the rising generation” (Coleman, 1997: 88). Social capital in the family is the time and effort spent by parents or family members with a child; thus the social capital of the family is the relationship between children and adults in the family. It involves the physical presence of parents or family members and the attention given by the adults to the children. In addition, social capital can be found in the community. It is manifest in parental relationships with institutions in the community (Coleman, 1997). Coleman uses the term ‘intergenerational closure’, that is the relations between parents, children and social ties outside the family that come together to create a dense social structure of norms, extensive trust and obligations (Edwards et al., 2003). Thus, if we apply Bourdieu’s concept of social capital to parental choice of preschools, their social capital affects the kinds of resource and information they can access to make their choices. If we apply Coleman’s concept to the same process, parental obligations and expectations, information in social relations and effective sanctions, all influence their attitudes and actions taken when choosing a preschool.

#### Cultural capital and parental choice

Another important concept in social theory which is derived primarily from the work of the sociologist, Bourdieu, is cultural capital. He expanded the concept of capital to something more than just an economic concept (Moore, 2004; Reay, 2004). According to Bourdieu’s definition, cultural capital exists in three forms (Bourdieu, 1997): first, in the embodied state, people can reflect different actions and tastes in lifestyle which are rooted in early childhood experiences. Second, in the objectified

state, it exists in the form of cultural goods such as books, pictures, dictionaries and instruments. Third, it exists in the institutionalized state, for example, educational qualifications. Bourdieu in his later work developed a concept of habitus. Habitus exists in the lifestyle, values and expectations, and is developed through experience. It shapes an individual's action when making certain choices. Bourdieu argues that; *"Habits are an infinite capacity for generating products, thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions"* (cited in Haralambos and Holborn, 2004).

Bourdieu uses cultural capital to analyze the educational processes and opportunities which are associated with unequal social outcomes. Moore (2004: 451) explains that:

*Cultural capital is mainly within and through education ... It includes not only access to high cultural resources, but qualities of the self reflected in aspects such as speech, demeanour and dress that privilege individuals in the micro-politics of everyday life-as parents dealing with their children's schools.*

Bourdieu was concerned that children from different social classes have unequal academic achievement because cultural capital perpetuates transmission and accumulation in ways that affect social inequalities (Reay, 2004). He argued that students with middle-class backgrounds have been socialized into the dominant culture and they have an advantage in educational attainments. Educational systems are biased towards the culture of dominant social classes (upper and middle class), and dominant classes have the power to establish their own culture in the educational system (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004). Therefore, Bourdieu argued working-class failure is the fault of the education system, not working-class culture. Although people in Taiwan do not categorize people into different social classes and the boundaries between different social classes are not clear, according to a Taiwanese

Education Panel Survey (Tam, 2004), the educational backgrounds of parents also correlates with children's learning outcomes, and plays an important role in educational inequality in Taiwan.

Layder (1994) extended the concept of habitus when he described it as "the set of dispositions that feeds into a person's anticipations about what they want and what they can achieve in their interpersonal relations" (Layder, 1994: 144). He suggested that a middle-class person would typically feel more comfortable in dealing with authorities, such as teachers or head-teachers, because they have similar habitus in terms of the lifestyle and the values. This attitude influences how parents make choices and also how they are involved in education. Reay (2004) provides evidence to show that for middle-class parents successful educational experiences translate into self-confidence in dealing effectively with teachers. In addition, parents' cultural capital provides a good resource for engaging with the educational system; it gives them knowledge and information about schooling and empowers them to intervene in their children's education. Reay points out the different attitudes to school of working-class and middle-class parents are powerfully rooted in cultural capital.

Bourdieu (1997) also argued that cultural capital exists in the institutionalized state in the form of educational qualifications. In other words, parents with high educational qualifications have high cultural capital. Thus, cultural capital is implicit in parents' abilities to draw on a range of strategies in support of their children's schooling (Reay, 2004). This was evident in this research. For example, May is a secondary school teacher and has strong cultural capital which she used in a different way. She believed she can facilitate her daughter's academic learning. Consequently for her, the quality of the academic curriculum was not as important as outdoor activities when making



her choice. The benefits she looked for was improvement in her daughter's motor skills. Ming and Fang also mentioned that they could support their children's academic learning and therefore did not pay much attention to the preschool curriculum. In addition, other family members' cultural capital affected parental criteria for choosing a preschool. Ye's father-in-law was a retired teacher. He taught his grandson reading, writing, painting and crafts. As a result, the curriculum was not important for Ye. Attending a preschool was to provide her son with the opportunity to meet with other children. Instead of using their cultural capital to find the best school in objective terms they used it to help their children themselves and therefore looked to the preschools for particular aspects of their child's development.

On the other hand, for Jeng, Siao and Sing, the lack of cultural capital affected their confidence to help their children achieve academically. They relied on preschool teachers and had high expectations of them in terms of their children's academic learning; e.g. writing, reading, and calculating. They thought preschool teachers should teach children academic skills. Sing's husband expected their son to learn writing and calculating in the preschool. Jeng complained that academic progress was too slow. The benefits these parents wanted for their children was good preparation for primary school. They wanted to have more reading and writing in preschool education. Although Jeng, Siao and Sing lacked the cultural capital to teach their children themselves, they still believed children's academic achievements were important and therefore they needed to rely more on teachers.

Another form of cultural capital is the embodied state (Bourdieu, 1997) which reflects individuals' lifestyle and preferences. For example, Ming said he did not like a teacher with a Taiwanese accent. He preferred a teacher with "the style of an office

lady”. His perception of the teacher’s lack of cultural capital affected his choice of preschool. Alternatively, Jeng mentioned that she was not concerned about the teacher’s qualifications. She thought teachers with high qualification were arrogant and they were not nice to her so she preferred a friendly teacher rather than one with a high educational degree. Jeng lacked cultural capital so she did not feel comfortable communicating with teachers who had high cultural capital.

However, sociologists argue that differences in amounts of cultural capital between different social classes is not fixed or unchanging (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004). Parents with more cultural capital can use it to help their children’s academic achievement in order to benefit their economic capital in the future. For wealthy people who lack cultural capital, they can spend extra money on education to help their children develop their cultural capital. In Taiwan, family incomes have increased dramatically over the last two decades so many parents provide music, painting and English lessons for their children at the preschool stage. These kinds of expectations may affect their criteria when choosing a preschool. They may expect that these lessons, especially English lessons, will enhance their children’s cultural capital and also their academic achievement. In addition, parents with cultural capital may help their children with academic learning such as reading or writing in order to give them an advantage when starting primary school.

#### Social class and parental choice

Lauder (1997) points out that education becomes an even more powerful means of translating material capital into cultural capital when operating in a free market. This produces an unequal educational market. Many researchers have emphasized the

impact of differences of social class on parents' experience of the choice process (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Ng, 2000; Reay and Lucey, 2000; Vincent and Martin, 2002; Ball et al., 2004; Vincent et al., 2004). They have found that parents' social class not only shapes their beliefs and values about education, but also influences their ability to make a choice in schooling. According to Weberian theories, social class is defined as a cluster of economic classes; income and educational levels which are highly correlated with social-economic status (Ng, 2000). For Bourdieu (Hausman and Goldring, 2000; Ng, 2000), social class affects the level of parental involvement in children's educational processes.

One most cited study focusing on the relationship of parental choice and social class is that of Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe. Their study was conducted from 1991 to 1994 in London to look at how parents chose a secondary school for their child. Their findings (Gewirtz et al., 1995) divided educational choosers into three types: the privileged/skilled chooser, the semi-skilled chooser and the disconnected chooser. The researchers believed that these types are strongly related to people's social backgrounds because different social groups engage with schools in different ways and also have different resources for accessing the educational system. The researchers believed that disconnected choosers are almost always from disadvantaged social background; the semi-skilled are a mixed class group; and privileged/skilled choosers are normally middle class (Gewirtz et al., 1995).

Disconnected choosers do not see that their children's enjoyment and educational success will depend on a consumerist approach to school choice (Gewirtz et al., 1995). For them, choice seems more a process of confirmation rather than comparison because they see all schools as much the same; thus visiting schools is often for the

purpose of seeing the school already selected rather than a part of the process of choosing. They may begin with limited choices often related to location; nearness and being part of their social community (Gewirtz et al., 1995). Similarly, Reay and Lucy (2000) found that locality is important for working-class families. They identified a need for a sense of security, belonging and connection with the local comprehensive. Working-class parents feel more comfortable about, and confident in sending their children to the local school. Some studies have also found that working-class families always feel less welcome than middle-class families in schools (cited in Ng, 2000). This may influence their interest in engaging with, and confidence in, choosing schools. Thus, they limit the choice of schools for their children. In addition, travelling expenses or lack of transport may limit their choice (Ng, 2000; Hausman and Goldring, 2000). Travelling expenses are part of the economic burden for parents from a disadvantaged economic background. They have to take it into consideration and may avoid selecting a school far from their home (Ng, 2000). Therefore, such research argues, parents from disadvantaged social backgrounds are in a less advantageous situation when choosing schools.

Gewirtz et al. (1995) pointed out that semi-skilled parents were inclined to engage more with choosing schools, but they did not have the appropriate skills to interrogate the information and do not feel confident in knowing what benefits their children's development best. They find themselves unable to distinguish between schools and therefore, rely on personal impressions and second-hand sources of information when choosing schools.

For the privileged / skilled parents, choosing schools became a major activity over a period of time. These parents are looking for the 'best' school which will match their

children's interests and needs but they also find it is very complex and difficult. As Vincent and Ball's research (2001) confirms, these parents, who almost all come from the middle-class, are doing their best to try to find the right school for their children. They visit schools repeatedly; collect information about a school's reputation, check their references and use their social networks to elicit knowledge about education and also information about each school. Vincent and Martin, (2002:115) argued that 'middle-class parents perceived a congested labour market with credential inflation, and were subsequently anxious to secure their children's future'. These parents (like Taiwanese parents) may believe that having a better start in education will lead to greater success in the future (Hewitt and Maloney, 2000).

Furthermore, middle class parents are often able to use direct contact or negotiation to access schools, and also have the financial resources to consider different sorts of private provision or choose to change schools if they are not happy (Naddaus, 1990; Vincent and Ball, 2001; Vincent et al., 2004). This coincides with Ng's finding (2000) about social background difference in parent involvement in education in Hong Kong. He found that middle-class parents have greater social capital and this helps them to visit the school that they want, but working-class parents do not find it easy to do anything when selecting schools for their children. Gewirtz et al. (1995: 25) point out *"This is where social and cultural capital plays a crucial role, knowing how to approach, present, mount a case, maintain pressure, make an impact and be remembered"*.

To summarise, middle class parents have more social capital which may help them to access their choices of schools easily. On the other hand, parents from a disadvantaged social background may not have any choice for their children because

of the shortage of finances or social resources. As Ng (2000:57) states

*Working-class parents are in a worse position for getting involved in school education. School knowledge and skills directing to social power and prestige are made available to the advantaged social class but are withheld from the working class.*

The study in this thesis also found that parents' educational, occupational and economic backgrounds affected their criteria for choice and also their opportunities for choosing preschools. The equality and equity of parental choice of preschools are highlighted here.

***- effects on the process of decision making***

The three types of choosers categorized by Gewirtz et al. (1995) can also be found in this research although people in Taiwan do not categorize people into different social classes and the boundaries between different social classes are not clear. If we analyze the educational and occupational background of the parents (Table 3.1 in Chapter Three), both mothers and fathers, it is evident that the three types of chooser are present and which type any one parent is correlates with their educational and occupational background.

For example, Jeng made her decision before visiting the schools, and chose the schools based on her relatives' suggestions. Jeng was not concerned about the varying quality of different preschools; as long as the fees were affordable and the times were suitable for her. She was not inclined to engage with the market and could therefore be said to be a disconnected chooser (Gewirtz et al., 1995). Jeng had a senior high

school certificate and her husband had a junior high school certificate. Both of them were factory workers, and in Western terms might be described as working-class.

Siao could also be described as working class but she matched Gewirtz et al.'s description of a semi-skilled chooser. She was concerned about the quality of preschools but she did not feel confident in her criteria for choosing. Siao trusted her sister-in-law's choice in the first interview but she preferred her brother's choice later and by the second interview wanted to transfer her daughter to a public school. Siao and her husband were employees of a stallholder in a traditional market. She graduated from a senior high school and her husband had a junior high school certificate.

Chen was a skilled chooser. She visited ten schools before making her decision. When she chose Kai School, she had visited it three times in total in order to observe the interaction between teachers and children. Chen also attended the graduation ceremony in both Kai School and Le School to compare the differences. Chen had a two year college certificate and was an IT support worker in a financial centre. Chen's husband was a civil servant and studying for a master's degree. They could clearly be described as a middle-class family.

However Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe's research was focused on the choice of secondary schools in a Western society (England) and their categories of chooser (parents) may not fully apply to this research. In the Taiwanese context, family members have strong influences on parents' choice. Many influences have to be considered. For example, Ling chose a preschool because her sister-in-law worked there so Ling knew all teachers in the preschool and trusted them. Sing chose the school because her

brother had studied there and Sing's mother suggested she chose it. Weng chose the preschool which was next to her parents' house. Ye chose the public kindergarten which was close to their house because Ye's father-in-law took all the responsibility of caring and educating Ye's son. She did not need worry about the quality of preschool provision. Although Weng, Sing and Ye did not take time to collect information about preschools and compare the differences of quality preschools before making their decision, yet they all felt confident and satisfied with their choices. However, none of them can be clearly identified as disconnected, semi-skilled or skilled choosers.

***- effects on parental voice***

In this section I will discuss whether parents are likely to influence what happens in the schools once they have chosen, and in the Western literature how parents engage with schools and teachers is seen to be social class based.

Parents' cultural capital and occupational background reflects their social status. From parents' attitudes to and interaction with teachers, we can explore the effect of such differences. Vincent and Martin (2002) mention that parents' social status, habitus, and social and cultural resources make a significant difference in the way parents voice their opinions. Working class parents think schools have their own language and procedures, which are not easily accessible to them (Vincent and Martin, 2002). In addition, as working-class parents may have lower occupational prestige than teachers they lack confidence in their ability to communicate with teachers (Lareau, 1997). Lareau (1997) points out that a middle-class person will feel more at ease when dealing with authority figures such as teachers or lawyers, because of shared



values, life experiences and educational background. Therefore, Lareau argues that some schools make middle-class families feel more welcome than working-class families. If this was reflected in this research some parents would feel uncomfortable dealing with teachers; and others would be quite confident in talking about their requirements to head-teachers or members of staff.

Obvious contrasting examples were Jeng and Chen (their backgrounds see above). Both of them were not satisfied with the discipline in the schools. Chen chose to talk directly to the teacher about her dissatisfaction and voice her requirement in order to improve the situation. However, Jeng did not believe that the teacher would accept her opinion. She chose passive action and tried to move her daughters to another preschool. When she could not she accepted the situation. Another example was Ling, who did not feel comfortable in talking to teachers. Her daughter was frustrated by having the same homework for nearly two months because she did not give the correct answer. Ling did not agree with teaching strategies of the teachers but she did not talk to teachers until her daughter cried and refused to write the homework. Whereas Jun, who had a masters degree from the United Kingdom and whose husband was a medical doctor was not satisfied with the school meals when she visited the school and suggested to the head teacher that they should be changed. She was happy that the head teacher accepted her opinions and this led her to choose Choc School. Jun's educational background and her husband's occupation gave her confidence in making such suggestions to the preschool. Compared to Chen and Jun's attitude, Jeng and Ling were more passive as far as interacting and communicating with teachers.

### 6.1.3 Summary

In this research the parents' choice processes were shown to be very complex. They can be considered to be acting rationally in that they used their own criteria to calculate the benefits and costs of a particular choice within their own conditions of certainty and uncertainty. In the real world, uncertain variables exist for every decision made and cannot be avoided. Therefore, it would be unfair to claim that the parents were not acting rationally because they cannot calculate all the risks although it is difficult to say their action was purely rational. Human action cannot be put alongside other purely rational types of action (Hechter and Kanazawa, 1997; Scott, 1995; Zey, 1998). The findings support Goldthorpe's view (1998) that any individual's rational choices will always be affected by their value shifts and traditional habits. When the parents calculate the benefits and costs of choosing a particular preschool, their own values deeply influence their choices. Consequently, it is not a purely rational action (Zey, 1998); sometimes, they have to risk the unknown.

In addition, an assumption of rational choice theory is that an individual's action is based on an individual's preferences. It is subjective rather than objective. Scott (1995: 84) points out that *"The value of a reward is the utility that it has for a person, and this subjective matter can vary greatly from one person to another"*. Zey argues that the motivation of human actors has its bases in definitions of rationality. Hechter and Kanazawa (1997) point out that without understanding an individual's unique value hierarchy; his/ her action is unpredictable. Therefore, rational choice theory can explain what people have done, but it is difficult to use to anticipate their actions (Scott, 1995; Zey, 1998).

Moreover, Zey (1998) points out that rational choice theorists try to explain social interaction through economic transactions. However, the power in social relationships has to be taken into account. For all the reasons discussed above some parents have more power than others. The outcome of their choice will depend on the relative power of the participants (Scott, 1995). This may be a key factor in how parental choice impacts on the quality of the preschool provision but it does not mean that within their own limits each parent's choice was not rational.

## **6.2 How does parental choice impact on quality of preschool provision in Taiwan?**

The preschool provision in Taiwan operates within a free and active market. Individual parents choose preschools based on their personal values of preschool education. However, preschools need customers in order to survive in a competitive market. Gewirtz et al. (1995: 2) state:

*The education market (like all markets) is intended to be driven by self-interest: first, the self-interest of parents, as consumers, choosing schools that will provide maximum advantage to their children; second, the self interest of schools or their senior managers, as producers, in making policy decisions that are based upon ensuring that their institution thrive, or at least survive, in the marketplace.*

We can assume that parents wanted to choose the 'best' preschool for their children. Even though the parents chose differently, they all tried to maximize the benefits for their children. But what were the benefits they looked for? If parents use the 'correct' criteria and have enough information about each preschool, then in an active market parental choice would improve the quality of preschool provision. However, as has been discussed above, the real world is much more complex. My research aim was to

explore how parental choice impacts on the quality of preschool provision. In a free market condition, the demands of customers will affect the supply of providers. Parents' criteria for choosing preschool may influence preschool provision in Taiwan, especially in such an active market. In this section I return to that aim and consider whether the parents' criteria for choice are likely to ensure the quality of preschool provision.

### **6.2.1 Where the parents' definition of quality matched the universal definition**

From the discussion in Chapter Two, quality preschools can be assessed by structural features (e.g. staff-child ratios, group size, teachers' qualifications, physical environment and curricula) and processes features (teacher-child interactions and the child's actual experience in preschools). In general the parents' criteria for choosing preschools, for example teacher-child ratios, safe and clean environment, various and nice facilities, kind and patient teachers, are similar to those elucidated in Western research (Cryer et al., 1999; Helburn and Howes, 1996; Mooney et al., 2003; Nutbrown, 1999; Podmore, 2004).

The study found that initially the parents were more concerned about the structural aspects of quality but this is because it is easier for parents to assess the quality of structural features of preschools rather than process features. But in the second interviews there was evidence that the parents also used process features to judge the quality of the preschool provision. The parents' on-going experience helped them to have a better understanding of teacher-child and teacher-parent interactions and appropriate experience and practice in the classroom. However, the findings of this study also showed that some aspects from the Western research (Curtis, 1998; Drury

et al., 2000; Roseman, 1999) do not appear in parents' criteria for choosing preschool.

### **6.2.2 What is missing in from the parents' definition of quality**

Two aspects that appear in the universal definition that were mentioned by very few parents were outdoor space and qualified teachers.

#### Outdoor space

Curtis (1998) argues that there should be enough space, both indoors and outdoors, for children to move around freely. However, outdoor space is not a preschool regulation in Taiwan as it is difficult for preschools to have large outdoor spaces in Taipei. People are used to living in a high density city. Therefore, outdoor space did not appear in most of parents' criteria when they chose preschools. Only Shieh and May wanted a large outdoor space when choosing preschools.

#### Qualified teachers

Of perhaps more concern is the lack of reference to teachers' qualifications in the parents' criteria. The parents did not pay attention to teachers' qualifications when they chose preschools. Only Jian believed an appropriate preschool teacher had to have a degree in early childhood education in order to have the correct knowledge for helping children's development (Roseman, 1999). Most parents talked of the importance of teachers' characters but did not pay attention to teachers' knowledge of child development or learning theory when they chose preschools. As more than half the staff in private preschools are unqualified (Chien, 2004; Lin, 2002), the quality of

the provision may be a concern.

### Improving quality by enforcing legal registration

As most parents in this research did not ask about the registration of schools when they chose preschools and assumed that the preschools they chose were legally registered and the teachers in the schools were qualified, it could be assumed that the national regulations are having little impact on the quality of the education provided. Hui and Gao believed that a “big” preschool or preschool with high tuition fees would be legally registered and have high quality of staff compared to a small preschool or a cheap preschool. They did not ask about the registration of the schools or teachers’ qualifications when they visited preschools. However, both the criteria of quality not mentioned by parents (outdoor space, teacher’s qualifications) are legal requirements for kindergarten, but not for nursery (see Chapter One). The Taiwanese government, therefore, needs to enforce the regulations and make sure that parents are informed as to their different applications.

### **6.2.3 Additional aspects of the parents’ criteria of quality**

The parents also had some criteria for choice that did not appear in the Western research. Chinese culture, parents’ personal experience and their anxiety for their children in a future of global competition shaped their expectations for preschool education. All these factors could explain why Taiwanese parents in this research were particularly concerned for their children to learn English and to be taught formally.

### Formal pedagogy in preschool curriculum

One difference is the expectation of a preschool curriculum. Taiwanese parents believe high academic achievement leads to a great future (Hou, 2002); therefore the family sacrifices and mobilizes its resources to provide an environment conducive to children's academic achievement (Yunus, 2005). Because of this parents are concerned about children's academic learning in preschool and many preschools focus on English and Chinese literacy learning especially for four and five year old children in Taiwan, as noted by Lin (2002) and Huang (2001). Learning academic skills in preschools, such as Chinese literacy and arithmetic, was important for Chen, Hsu, Shieh, Ling, Siao, Jeng, Jian, Sing and Gao, and as discussed above thirteen of the parents considered English learning opportunities when they chose preschools.

Whilst it is understood elsewhere that young children learn effectively in a number of ways including exploring, observing and listening, playing and talking (DES 1990), this was not acknowledged by Taiwanese parents. For example, Ming, Jeng and Sing's husband did not agree that "play" was a part of learning for young children. Ming said *"There was no curriculum. Children did not learn anything in the preschool. They only play, draw pictures and do craft works"*. Chen's (1998) also found that parents in Taiwan see books as the most important material for learning rather than other materials, such as toys, sand and water. Jeng and Sing's husband thought preschool curriculum should more focus on children's academic learning such as writing, reading and calculating skills. Learning through play appears more accepted in the West (Abbott, 1994; Curtis, 1998; Nutbrown, 1999).

Drury et al. (2000) suggested a high quality preschool curriculum must be focused on

children's development rather than on academic subject areas and the acquisition of knowledge. Preschool education has to provide broad areas of curriculum to meet young children's needs of development (DES 1990; Nutbrown, 1999; Siraj-Blatchford, 1998). Compartmentalization of learning into subjects is inappropriate and sometime against the ways in which children think and learn. However, Jun and Gao preferred a preschool with a strict curriculum plan which had fixed timetable for different subjects and used textbooks. They thought that a strict curriculum and subject based teaching would help them be aware of their children's learning in the preschools. Ling's, Jeng's, Siao's children did worksheets everyday and they were happy with that. Early childhood educators in Taiwan (Huang, 2001; Lin, 2002; Tsai, 2002; Wei, 2002; Yang, 2002) are concerned that subject based teaching and teacher-centred curriculum are not an appropriate approach for young children. Huang (2001) points out that when parents give a lot of attention to the learning outcome, they neglect the learning and investigating process. How to help parents understand their children's development and processes of learning is an import and necessary task for policymakers and all preschool practitioners.

#### Parents anxieties for children's English language learning

Many parents in this research were looking for English language learning when they considered the preschool curriculum. The provision of English language teaching was one of the essential criteria for thirteen of the eighteen parents when they chose a preschool. Not surprisingly, Chang et al. (2002) found that although English language is not part of the national curriculum for preschool education in Taiwan, ninety seven percent of private and one third of public preschools provided English lessons for children.



Some parents spent a lot of time during the interviews talking about how important English was in preschool education. They believed that competence in English would contribute to their children's success in their future academic study and career. For example, Ming mentioned that his wife's colleagues had better opportunities in their careers because of their English language capabilities. Some of the parents regretted that they had not learned English when they were young (even though they had done so at school) as they were now not able to use English in their work. Their experience led them to believe that children would have greater success in English language learning, if they started early.

However, English is a foreign language in Taiwan; the languages that Taiwanese people use for their daily life are Mandarin or a Taiwanese dialect. McLaughlin, (1984) argues that the differences in linguistic environment to which children are exposed affects their approach to language. Parents who lack confidence to talk to their children in English because of their own lack of competence try to offset this disadvantage by sending children to bilingual schools or giving them private lessons with foreign teachers. They believe interaction and communication with foreign teachers will provide a stimulating English language environment for their children with opportunities to listen and speak English. Six parents, Hui, Siao, Chen, Gao, Chong and Jian, sent their children to bilingual or whole English language schools although the fees were much higher than in a traditional school. Hui, compared different schools' curricula and found some bilingual schools only focusing on English language learning and ignoring other areas. Whilst she preferred a curriculum which gave diversity such as painting, body movement, music or computing lessons, she still chose a bilingual school because she wanted her child to improve her English

skills.

**- *English as a global language***

In considering why learning the English language is so important for Taiwanese parents, that the fact that English is a global language cannot be ignored. The parents' beliefs have been influenced by more general globalization. As Jian said, "*English will still be a global language in twenty to fifty years time*".

English has had a strong influence since the beginning of the nineteenth century when Great Britain was the world's leading industrial and trading country and British political imperialism meant that English was used around the world. During the twentieth century, America became the leading global economy but 'the language behind the US dollar was English' (Crystal, 2003). In addition, the increased global contact manifested in international tourism, business, scientific exchange, the media, and in the new networked society has reinforced this. According to Crystal (1997 in Warschauer, 2000), eighty five percent of international organizations in the world make official use of English; at least eighty five percent of the world's film market is in English, and ninety percent of published articles in academic fields, such as linguistics, are written in English. These figures confirm the primacy of English as a global language in twenty-first century (Crystal, 2003; Holborow, 1999; McLaughlin, 1984). The salesman who has a better capability in English will have more opportunities to explore and expand international markets. A researcher who can write fluent papers in English will have more opportunities to be published in international journals. Competency in English becomes a symbol of positional goods for a people in a globalized world.

In Taiwan, the media have perpetuated the idea that competency in English will be the gateway to success in a globally competitive environment. According to an article in the Business Today Magazine Vol 420 '*Educating your children to be an elite*' (Wu, 2005), the first criterion of the elite is language capability. Kai-Lien Tsou, a general manager of international information at Yahoo Co Ltd was quoted as saying "*If you want to be connected in the international world, language capability has to be good. If you can speak English fluently, your confidence will come after that*". Many similar articles have strongly influenced parents' ambitions for their children in Taiwan. Thus, if they wish their children to hold their own in global competition, learning English has to be major goal. This can explain why sixty five percent of preschool age children are learning English, why there are more than four thousand English cram schools and why every year Taiwanese parents spend more than 130 billion Taiwanese dollars (around 2.2 billion pounds) for their children to learn English (Song, 2005). This is despite many early childhood educators and specialists (Chang et al., 2001; Chang et al., 2002; Song, 2005; Wu, 2004) publishing articles that warn parents against focusing too much on English language learning and ignoring children's other development. However, the parents in this research were anxious that their children would lag behind in English leaning if they did not learn it at preschool. They believed that the early years were the critical period in language learning.

***- giving children an advantage in English language learning***

Whilst some parents in this research did not mention English as a global language, they were nonetheless still concerned about English language teaching and learning. This was because English language is a part of the formal curriculum in primary

schools. Gao, Sing and Shieh wanted to help their children to be well prepared for primary school. They worried that if their children did not learn English in preschool, they would be disadvantage when they entered primary school. In addition, in Chinese culture, people believe that intelligence is not something innate and relatively fixed but rather something which can be improved by hard work (Watkins, 2000). Therefore, Chinese parents believe that learning the English language is a long process that requires considerable mental application and a long term effort (Song, 2005). In order to achieve well, Gao, Sing and Shieh believed that it was necessary for their children to start learning English language as early as possible.

***- the critical period in language learning***

Jun and Hsu also believed this was the critical period for learning the language. For example, Jun spent nearly half an hour in the interview explaining the reason that she believed her son had to learn English at an early age. This was not just because he would learn English for longer or get into good working habits but as she believed his young age to be the best time for learning languages. The critical period for language learning has been discussed and argued about many decades. Penfield (1959 cited in McLaughlin, 1984) believed that the brain of the child was plastic and an adult's is rigid and set; therefore, he believed that children acquired languages with ease before the age of nine. Lenneberg (1967 cite in McLaughlin, 1984) argued that as first language acquisition takes place naturally between the age of two and puberty this was the critical period for learning language. He believed that 'the brain has not developed the capacities it needs for language acquisition earlier, and after puberty the brain has lost its cerebral plasticity because of the completion of the process of cerebral dominance, or the lateralization of the language function'.

However, Buhler (1972), Ervin- Tripp (1974), Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978), and Krashen, Long and Scarcella (1979) found evidence against the hypothesis that the earlier the children begin to learn a second language the better language acquisition they achieve (cited in McLaughlin, 1984; Liao, 1998). Harley et al. (1995) believed that younger children had some advantages in language skills, such as listening comprehension and pronunciation; however, they learned the grammar of the second language more slowly than older learners and therefore made slower progress. Cameron (2001) mentions that in foreign language learning, grammatical knowledge is linked not just to language development but to cognitive development. Harley et al. (1995) also suggested that language learning should take place in a naturalistic context and not necessarily only through school-based learning.

There is a big debate in Taiwan about the critical period for language learning. Many scholars suggest to parents that it is not necessary to worry about the critical period for language learning (McLaughlin, 1984; Liao, 1998; Wu, 2004). However, the mass media (which includes TV or advertisements) reinforces the theories of the critical period which puts parents under pressure and leads them to believe that learning English language is important at a young age. As a result, of all this discussion, offering English language teaching becomes an important factor for preschools when considering survival in the Taiwanese preschool market.

### **6.3 Reconceptualising preschool quality**

As argued above there are certain things that the government could do to improve the quality of preschool provision. They could enforce the registration process and insist

that all teachers were qualified but trying to prevent preschools teaching English is less enforceable. Parents would just go elsewhere and even more cram schools would be started. It therefore may be better to accommodate the parents' desire for English language teaching. Would this necessarily mean that quality had to be sacrificed? Dahlberg et al. (1999) point out that defining quality needs to be contextualized, spatially and temporally, and has to recognize cultural and other significant forms of diversity. Therefore, in recent years there has been growing concern about meaning and definition of 'quality' in preschool education (Tanner et al., 2005).

Moss (1994) and Dahlberg et al. (1999) argue that 'quality' is not a neutral word and it is a socially constructed concept which depends on the needs and values of individuals. It is a subjective term and individuals' have their own definitions (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Hawes and Stephens (1990) even argued that if a researcher asked a primary school teacher what she meant by quality in education, her answer would depend on who was asking the questions.

To the parents, she will speak of examination results;

To the inspector, quality education is about improved standards in reading or handwriting and mathematics;

To the chairman of the school board, she may emphasize making good use of money;

To the professor, good teaching and learning practices may be important;

And to the mayor or a Member of Parliament, effective work-orientation may be the key concern.

Hence, different individuals may also have different explanations or understandings

about ‘quality’ arising from different values and beliefs, interests and needs. Defining quality through the specification of criteria gives a generalisable standard against which a product can be judged with certainty (Dahlberg et al., 1999). However, it is an on-going process; and whose views are included, what is being measured, and how it is measured need to be challenged (Moss, 1994). Quality needs to be defined across time and place (Tanner et al., 2005). Therefore, Myers (2004) argues that a universal definition of quality cannot possible accommodate the diversity and subjectivity that exists in the world. He suggests that using a post-modern vision defining quality in preschools will emphasise multiple truths, uncertainty and the coexistence of many different points of view.

### **6.3.1 Accommodating different stakeholders’ needs**

Moss (1994) describes the process of defining quality as involving stakeholders, setting goals for particular groups and therefore reflecting stakeholders’ needs, interests, concerns, priorities and cultural values (Mooney et al., 2003). Any definition of quality will be influenced by their beliefs and values. Stakeholders of course include more than children, their parents and families, but also staff, school providers, primary educators, professionals in early childhood education, policy makers and society itself. Different groups have different needs and values and will define quality differently (Ceglowski, 2004; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Katz, 1999; Mooney and Munton, 1998; Tanner et al., 2005). For example, parents may have different goals for preschool education from their children. The 1990 National Child Care Survey in the United States found that parents often explain their choice in terms of quality features including the number of adults and children, provider warmth, training or style, programme characteristics and the safety of settings and equipment

(cited in Larner and Phillips, 1994). On the other hand, the BASUN<sup>37</sup> project (cited in Langsted, 1994) and Hennessy's Study (1999) discovered that children regard other children as the most important factor in determining the quality of their centre. In addition, activities, toys and nice staff are also important criteria for young children. Any definition can be challenged by those with differing priorities or expectations (Cryer, 1999).

Parents are stakeholders but also consumers. In early childhood education, parents, professionals, school providers and policy makers share their interests in ensuring that children have opportunities to learn and grow up safely and appropriately; however, their criteria of preschool quality may be different. For example, Larner and Phillips (1994) argue that early childhood professionals want to provide objective and quantifiable standards to assess the quality of preschools, so these standards can be applied to a wide range of programmes and preschools. That leads professionals to focus on structural and some process quality issues in a preschool. However, from Larner and Phillip's perspective, parents may want their individual child to have a safe and pleasant experience, with learning outcomes which may be different from those of the professionals. Therefore, they believe that the critical difference between parental and professional perspectives on the quality of preschools is that parents are looking for a school which meets their children's and their own needs. They argue that the structural quality of preschools may translate into positive experiences for children but may not be reassuring to different parents. They also point out that early childhood professionals' and experts' criteria of quality of preschools have been referred to set standards for preschool programmes. However, parents are primary

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<sup>37</sup> The BASUN Project is a comparative study of the daily lives of ordinary young children in the five Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden



decision makers regarding preschools and customers in the preschool market (Cryer and Burchinal, 1997; Lerner and Phillips, 1994). They will try to find a particular school in which they are willing to entrust that their child's safety, happiness and development (Hughes et al., 1994).

### **6.3.2 Accommodating different cultural values**

As has been discussed elsewhere in this thesis cultural differences have to be considered. Tobin (2005) argues that the beliefs and practice of one culture cannot be meaningfully evaluated using the criteria of another culture. He uses examples from his ethnographic work on early childhood education in Japan and France to demonstrate that quality standards are cultural constructs. Therefore, standards of quality preschools cannot be universal or culture free. They have to reflect cultural values and individuals' concerns (Tobin, 2005). Myers (2004:19) has a similar view and states that "different cultures may expect different kinds of children to emerge from an early education experience and favour different strategies to obtain those goals". In Chinese culture, high academic achievements of children are expected and whole class activities are accepted in classroom practices. Parents were concerned about their children's English literacy and academic skills and this was reflected in their criteria for choosing preschools. However, how these can be accommodated alongside child-centred and play based approaches and how to give parents better knowledge of children's development and learning are questions and need to be explored.

However, it cannot be denied that parents' perspectives of quality have a powerful effect on preschool provision and also influence the school quality so their voice has

to be heard. This research supported that individual parent had different criteria which were influenced by their social and cultural backgrounds; personal experience and also family structures. It is difficult to improve the quality of preschool provision through changing parents' subjective and dynamic criteria. However, the Taiwanese Government may need to refer to Chinese cultural values, the criteria discussed in the Western research and children's needs in order to provide criteria for high quality preschools. Having clear regulations for teachers' qualifications and preschool registration would offer a certain level of guarantee for preschool quality and help parents to have knowledge and enough information to choose preschools.

#### **6.4 The need to improve the quality**

As this research only involved a small number of cases, it is difficult to assert any definitive conclusions at this time about the preschool market in Taiwan. But it does raise questions about policy development aiming to improve the quality of preschool provision.

First of all, parents used different criteria and actions to choose preschools. Their preferences depended on their personal values. However, their values did not always meet children's needs. The Taiwanese Government should have clear regulations based on the children's development and their needs, and be willing to enforce them in preschools. Currently the preschool provision involves two different systems, kindergartens and nurseries, which confuses parents. The findings showed that parents did not know the differences between kindergartens and nurseries; especially with regard to teachers' qualifications, outdoor space and curriculum. A policy initiative for combining kindergartens and nurseries has been discussed but it has not

been put into practice (see Chapter One). If kindergartens and nurseries were combined, similar standards of care and education could be applied to both. This would make it easier for parents to understand the regulations and therefore use them to choose preschools. This would encourage unregistered preschools to be registered.

Secondly, the findings would suggest that in a free market like Taiwan the children of more affluent and educated parents will not only have access to high quality preschool provision but their parents also have the power to influence what happens in the classroom. Less affluent and less educated parents are not able to advantage their children in the same way. Gewirtz et al. (1995) argued that educational resources should support those with greater educational needs but without private resources at home or in the community. However, their findings showed that parents who were from low social and economic status did not have as many choices as the middle-class families. They argued that the educational market is a middle-class mode and schools are increasingly meeting the perceived demands of middle-class parents. Reay (2004) indicates that the middle class parents can use choice to place their children in better schools in better areas; in contrast, parents who lack confidence find it difficult to comply with the free market of school choice. Their concerns are reflected in my research and perhaps amplified by the free market.

In theory, all parents can have the freedom to choose any preschool for their children. In reality, parents from low income families have insufficient finances and therefore have limited choices. Although early childhood educational vouchers are available, the amount of financial support is not enough to make a real difference. In addition, the voucher system only applies to five-year-old children. For parents who lack support from their families and need to send their children to preschool before the age

of five, it does not effectively support their needs. For instance, when Jeng chose a school for her two daughters, she had to make sure that the fees would be affordable and the school times met her employment needs. Jeng had limited choice in the preschool market. On the other hand, Chen chose Kai School because it had attractive facilities and used a bilingual approach. It had a school library and allowed parents to borrow English books for their children. The fees in Kai School were three hundred thousand Taiwanese dollars (five thousand British pounds) per year, which were not affordable for the less affluent families. The attractive facilities and high tuition fees in Kai School, were obviously intended to attract parents from advantage backgrounds. Ming considered their local circumstances. He believed the majority of his neighbours were working class. He decided to choose a private school which included preschool and primary education for his son. Parents from advantaged backgrounds can compare preschool curricula, teaching approaches and facilities during the processes of choosing preschools; on the other hand, parents from disadvantaged backgrounds may only consider a preschool within a narrow selection of affordable choices.

Only one third of preschools are public. The difference in fees between a private school and a public school is large<sup>38</sup> (Lin, 2002). A public kindergarten has financial support from the local educational authority. The quality of a public kindergarten will be monitored by the educational authorities. However, the number of public kindergartens is limited and they only accept children from four or five years old. It limits parents' choices and causes parents to send children to private schools. For parents from disadvantaged backgrounds, the financial burden denies their children

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<sup>38</sup> The fees for studying in a public kindergarten are about forty thousand to sixty thousand NT dollars per year which were about seven to nine hundred pounds (Lin 2002).

equal opportunities.

Gewirtz et al. suggested that the educational market should be concerned with equality and focus on a needs-based definition of equality but accessibility and affordability in preschool quality are important for parents, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, when we talk about improving the quality of preschool provision, we have to consider improving equality and equity of access for all children. In order to improve that, the Government of Taiwan planned to extend compulsory education by one year in 2001. Extending compulsory education could be conducted by setting up more public preschools or increasing the subsidies for low income families to attend private preschools. This would potentially narrow the gap of inequality in the preschool market (Tsai, 2002). However, extending compulsory education needs careful planning for teacher training, curriculum design and financial considerations. The policy initiative originally planned to apply in 2005 has been postponed. At the time of writing, the Government has not decided when it will be implemented.

Finally, the regulations relating to the preschool curriculum have to reconsider English language teaching. The finding of this study showed that the parents wanted their children to learn English in preschool, even though English language teaching in preschools is not recommended by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan (see Chapter One). This demand remains constant. If preschool providers want to survive in the preschool market, they have to provide the curriculum which meets parents' criteria for choice.

However, in meeting parents' expectations they do not necessarily meet the needs of

children. The regulations for the preschool curriculum do not support teaching English to preschool children nor does they give clear directions about English teaching to preschool practitioners (see Chapter One). The Taiwanese Government and early childhood educators should not only debate whether preschool children should learn English but they have to discuss and formulate an appropriate curriculum for English teaching and learning which matches the needs of children's development. All teachers of English in preschools should have the appropriate training relating to preschool practice. As many parents preferred a foreign teacher to teach English in preschools there is a demand for foreign teachers in the preschool market. However, the regulations for preschool registration state that a preschool provider cannot legally employ a foreign teacher to be a formal teacher in a preschool. The situation is that foreign teachers are employed by private English language institutions who then provide preschool classes (Wu, 2004). Therefore, a clear regulation for the employment of foreign teachers in preschools is necessary in order to ensure that preschool providers employ high quality foreign teachers trained to teach preschool children.

If the Government of Taiwan wants to improve the quality of preschool provision, it is necessary to have clear standards of quality but these standards need to take parental wishes into account. Clear regulations may help parents to choose a legally registered preschool and it also improve the quality of preschools. In addition, the effectiveness and efficiency of the voucher scheme and the possibilities of extending compulsory education need to be reconsidered in order to improve equality of access to preschool education.

## **6.5 Recommendation for further research**

This was a small study and had some limitations, as I noted in Chapter Three. I need to be wary of making broad generalizations. However, it followed the process eighteen parents undertook in choosing preschools over one year and in doing so raises some interesting questions. Addressing these questions through further research would strengthen the findings.

The data were collected before parents made their decisions, after parents had made their choice and after their children had preschool experience to explore parents' perceptions of quality. The research was not only to find out what parents chose for their children but also to gain a deeper understanding of the process of parental choice - how parents chose preschools; what their concerns were in the process of selecting preschools, what influenced their choices and satisfactions and how this can be used to improve the quality of preschool provision. This research found that, within their own terms, parents made their choices rationally and their criteria for choice influenced preschool provision in Taiwan.

However, this research found that Taiwanese parents may not have the same criteria of quality as Western professionals. This raises two questions. First, Western early childhood professionals suggest that teaching and learning through 'play' and a children-centred approach is the most appropriate pedagogy for young children (Abbott, 1994; Curtis, 1998; Nutbrown, 1999). This concept assumes that children are motivated learners (Curtis, 1998; Rodger, 1994). Therefore, teachers need to provide children with a wide range of materials which are freely available for children to use (Curtis, 1998). This is not the way that Taiwanese parents would traditionally interact

with their children. Traditional pedagogy in Taiwan is subject-based and teacher-directed. It provides parents with clear guidelines about what their children will be taught in preschool; what achievements are expected and what parents can do at home to help their children achieve better. Parents can clearly understand their children's progress in academic learning and this meets their expectation for 'education'. High quality 'play' may provide children with a positive learning experience but it needs teachers with abundant knowledge and capabilities to plan the curriculum and organize the activities. Although Western pedagogy has influenced Taiwanese preschool education for many years, using 'play' in teaching is still a big challenge for many Taiwanese preschool practitioners. Taiwanese practitioners were educated by using subject-based and teacher-directed approaches when they were students. They lack the knowledge, experiences, confidence and skills to use "play" for their teaching. If teachers lack knowledge or the capability to do this (Cheng, 2003) and if they have pressure from parents' perspectives of preschool pedagogy, there is a question as to whether children can enjoy learning or effectively learn through play. In the Taiwanese context, how to help preschool practitioners to use 'play' and child-centred approach confidently and how teaching pedagogy can be improved in Taiwanese preschools need further research to explore.

The findings also confirmed the demands for English language teaching in preschools. Parents believe that starting English language learning earlier will advantage their children both because of their belief in the need to compete in a world where English is a global language and also because they believe that success is an outcome of hard work, and accepting that at an early age will be beneficial. This is a wide debate (as discussed earlier in this chapter) with no strong evidence to support the idea that children learning English in preschool will perform better in English in the future.



There is also little research that investigates whether bilingual (English-Chinese) preschools are appropriate for preschool children in the Taiwanese context. If the focus is on English language teaching, are other important aspects of child development ignored? Thus early second language teaching may not be a good thing for young children (McLaughlin, 1984; Liao 1998). The tension between the demands for English language teaching and the worries for children's development are played out in Taiwan's preschool provision. If the preschools are responding to parents' criteria for choice, they need to know how to teach English to young children in a way that also meets other developmental needs. Again this is a debate that indicates a need for further research.

In addition, when this research started, most children in this research were three or under three years old. When I completed the data collection, the children were only four years old. However, parents' expectations of preschool education for three-, four- and five-year-old children may be different. Their on-going engagement with preschool provision also enabled them to take a more sophisticated view of preschool quality. Thus, their experiences in choosing preschools may influence their strategies for selecting primary schools. It is worth continuing with further research. The research also found that individual parents had different expectations for preschool education which were reflected on their criteria for selecting preschools. What they chose may influence their children's outcomes. For example, some parents were more concerned about physical development than literacy and numeracy learning. On the other hand, some parents preferred preschools to focus on teaching academic skills, such as reading, writing and calculating. Further research is needed to probe such questions as:

- Do parents' expectations for preschool education affect their children's

outcomes?

- Do children's outcomes match their parents' initial expectations?
- Do first children's outcomes change parents' expectations of preschool education for younger children?

Last but not least, the findings showed that the parents did not pay attention to the national evaluation process. Some parents knew that the Government evaluated preschool quality but they did not trust the results of the evaluation. They preferred collecting information by asking their friends or relatives (people they trusted) or searching websites. However, if they could be persuaded to trust the national evaluation outcomes it could be a selling point for the preschools and a means by which the government could encourage preschool providers to improve the quality of their preschools. How this could be done may also need to be explored in further research.

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## Appendix 1: The location of Taiwan



## Appendix 2: Diary

親愛的家長：您好

我是英國巴斯大學教育研究所博士班學生，指導教授是 Dr Felicity Wikeley 和 Dr. Rita Chawla-Duggan，我的博士研究  
是探討家長選擇幼兒學校的考量，想藉此了解家長對幼兒教育及學校的真正期望。這份記錄表，需要麻煩您記錄參觀每  
間園所後的寶貴意見，整個研究著重於對您個人意見的研究，您僅需將您個人意見的表達，您所提供的任何意見，對於我的研究將有很大的幫助。

謝謝您的協助，提供我在學術研究上所需要的第一手珍貴資料，您所提供的任何訊息，我絕對保密，僅用於此研究。  
若您對於這份記錄表有任何疑問，歡迎隨時與我連絡。

我的 email address：[ch258@bath.ac.uk](mailto:ch258@bath.ac.uk) 或

[hsieh762002@yahoo.com.tw](mailto:hsieh762002@yahoo.com.tw)

謝佳吟 敬上

Dear XXX ,

I am a Phd student in the Department of Education at the University of Bath. My supervisors are Dr. Felicity Wikeley and Dr. Rita Chawla-Duggan. I am doing a research about parental choice for preschools in Taiwan. I want to probe parents' expectation of pre-school education and their criteria for choosing preschools. This diary includes six questions. I need your help to fill information after you visit each school. Your opinions will be very useful for this research.

Thank you very much for your assistance for providing important information to me. All the detail that you provide will only use for this research. If you have any further question, please feel free to contact to me.

My email address: [ch258@bath.ac.uk](mailto:ch258@bath.ac.uk) or

[hsieh762002@yahoo.com.tw](mailto:hsieh762002@yahoo.com.tw)

Many thanks,

Sincerely yours,

Chia-Yin Hsieh

日期 (date)：
園所全名 (the name of the school)：
<p>一、這間園所採用的教學方式為何？(如雙語、蒙特梭利、主題教學、全美語…等。)</p> <p>(What kind of approach does this school use? A bilingual, Montessori, A “theme”, A Whole English language approach.... )</p>
<p>二、為何選擇參觀此園所？(Why do you visit this school?)</p>
<p>三、請您簡單的描述這間園所。(Please simply describe this preschool.)</p>

四、您覺得這間園所的優點為何? (What do you *like* this school?)

五、您覺得這間園所的缺點為何? (What do you *dislike* this school?)

六、您是否有將此園所列入考慮為您孩子就讀之學校，為什麼? (Would you consider sending your child to this school? Why?)